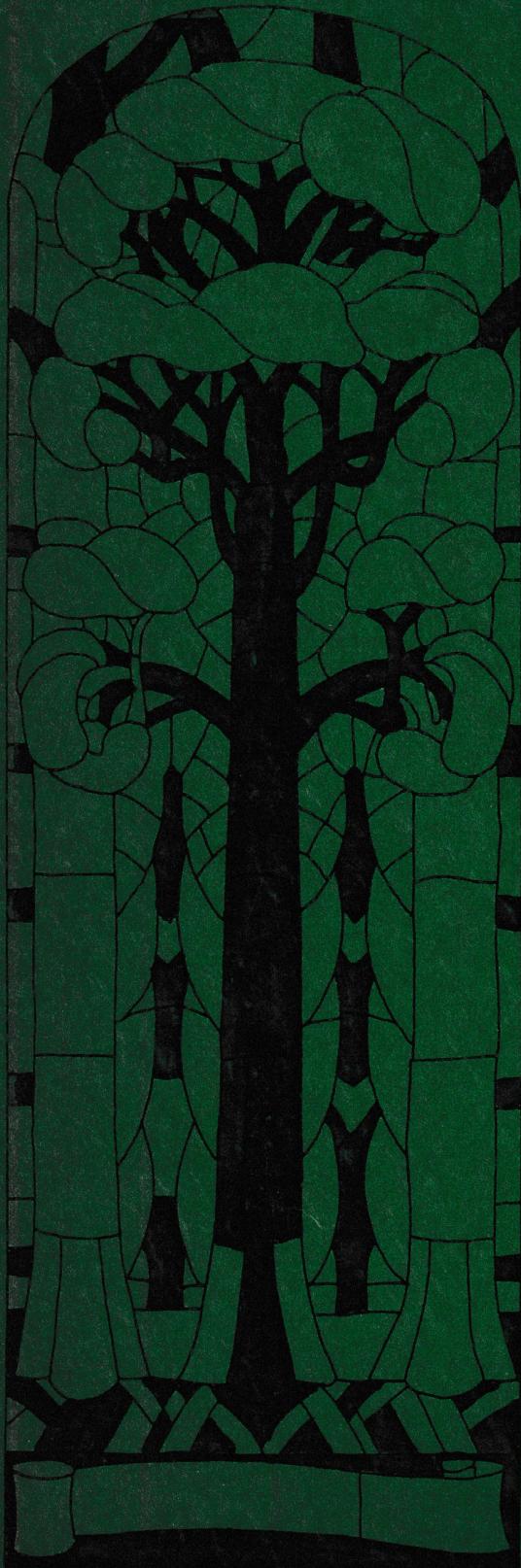


AS I DO THEE 8

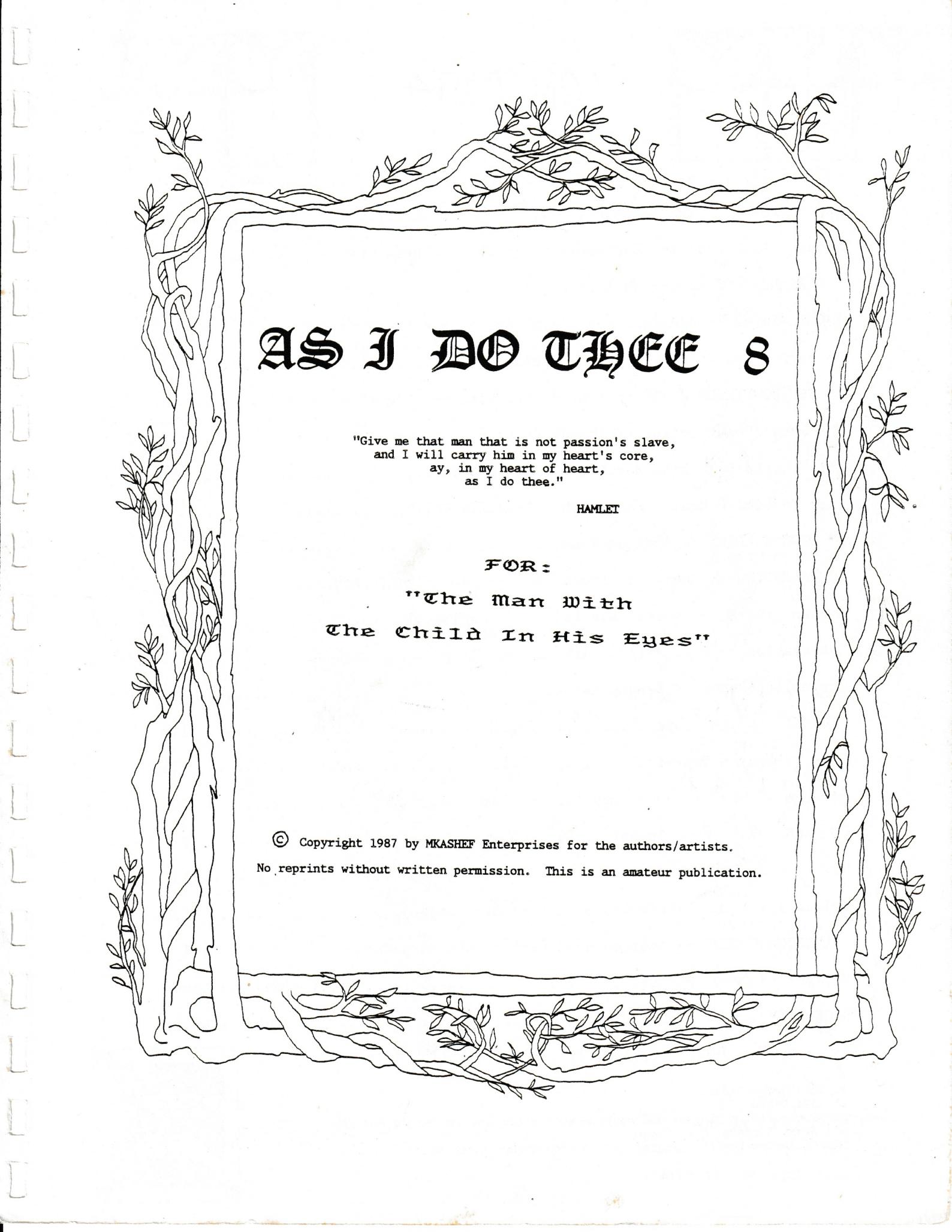




WASTELANDS

Dry wind tastes
the same bitterness as I;
indistinguishable from the
sands of the Forge,
my tongue has become as dust.
The sun slowly moves to set,
Soon, there will be only darkness --
reflection in the onyx glass
of my soul.

DOVYA BLACQUE



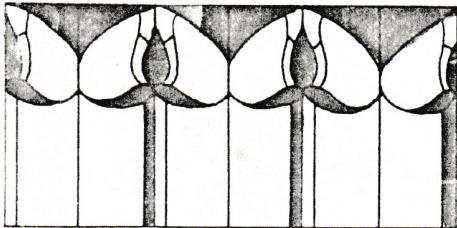
AS I DO THEE 8

"Give me that man that is not passion's slave,
and I will carry him in my heart's core,
ay, in my heart of heart,
as I do thee."

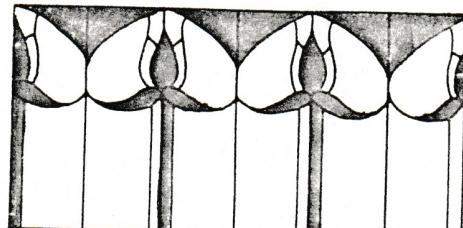
HAMLET

FOR:
"The Man With
the Child In His Eyes"

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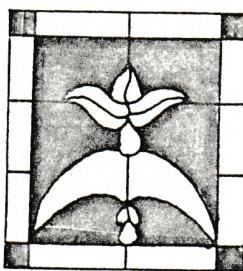


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EDITOR: Dovya Blacque
TYPIST: Ditto

Proofreader: IBM Speller and Dovya's eyes which are now narrow and amber!
All Story Borders: Caro Hedge
Miscellaneous Poetry Thingies And Whatchamahoogies: Chiya

Title Page: Shellie Whild



EDITORIAL:

"We are not going to kill today."

Strange subtitle for an editorial? Maybe, but it's what I find myself repeating over and over to myself lately. It seems that more and more, fandom is becoming an obstacle course of what is 'done' and what is 'not done'; behavior and opinions dictated to all of fandom by a select, self-appointed few.

What brought this on? A lot of things. The air of what's best and what's not, the feeling that if you (generic) speak up and say that you don't care for something that is 'popular' you are a mental deficient, the sense that there are all these 'unwritten rules' of fandom. Lately, everywhere I turn, someone seems to be telling me I shouldn't feel this way or I shouldn't say that, or I'm wrong about what I'm thinking. Well, there simply is no 'wrong' or 'right' when it comes to opinion there is simply 'popular' and 'unpopular'.

In my opinion, it would be very nice if we (fandom) could remember that the heart of what we are doing is STAR TREK, IDIC and Nome (the concept, not the zine); meaning that our differences -- whether of opinion, belief, skin color, or sexual preference -- should make us stronger, not weaker and fragmented. Tolerance, if not acceptance, should be an active part of everyone's dealing with the rest of fandom. Theoretically, we should be trying to rise above the problems of the rest of the world; we should be avoiding wars, not perpetuating them. Competition need not be a negative thing. One contest (like the one you'll find information on in this issue!) does not dictate for eternity who is best and who is not. What a contest does, is give those who want to compete the chance to test their skills as writers and storytellers against each other. This does not mean that one is 'right' and the rest 'wrong'; it merely means that one particular story was preferred by the judges over another. There is nothing wrong with healthy competition. It's when the competition becomes the all, the beginning and end to what is and what is not 'right', that I find very scary possibilities taking form.

Okay, enough of that....

There are three fairly long, very intricate, exciting, warm stories in AIDT #8 plus a variety of shorter stories including one by a writer new to fandom. Lynn Shomei is a hard-core McCoy fan (I don't think she'll mind me telling!) and so I'd like to give you a little fair warning that her story, ODD MAN OUT, deals with intimacies between Spock and McCoy as well as a K/S situation. I know some people don't care to read anything but K/S and have complained in the past when they've come across a variation of the K/S theme in a K/S zine. So, be warned. BUT, I suggest you don't skip this story as it is very, very good. Lynn is a wonderful writer and you'll be seeing much more from her soon.

The cover this time, as you may have noticed, is a reprint of an illustration for FROM THE FIELDS which was printed in AIDT #2. While I don't mind reprinting one of my favorite drawings, I would have preferred having something new for you. But... there aren't any artists out there doing K/S anymore, are there? You-whoo! Artists! If you're out there, let me hear from you. Send copies of your work so I can see what you do. I need you! [I'd like to thank Merle -- who will know I've reused this illustration when she receives her copy of this zine! -- for the beautiful drawing. I've had it for several years and it's one of my favorite things on my very crowded living room walls.]

I'd also like to thank Caro Hedge for coming through on time with all the story borders. They're lovely and add a nice flavor to the zine. And, Caro, you were right: Chiya was running out of story border ideas!

Well, let me hear from you for the contest. As is stated in the rules, you don't have to enter the contest. I welcome stories based on the contest illustration that are not entered in the competition. But, the same general rules apply to non-contest stories, too.

Enjoy the zine and let me know what you think of it.
In IDIC,

Dovya Blacque
Dovya Blacque

Suggested retail price: \$15.00.



67
150
George W. Glend

\$

THE SECOND SOON-TO-BE-FAMOUS 'AIDT'

WRITING CONTEST!!!! *

Here we go again! This time, the contest illustration is The Southern Cross cover to AIDT #6, reprinted here on the facing page.

Several things have already been written about this beautiful drawing, including the poem on the inside front cover of AIDT #6 by Faris Vincent. But there have to be hundreds of ideas out there, so....

Here are the rules:

- 1-As always, all submissions must be typed double-spaced and be accompanied by an appropriate SASE and a business size SASE (or if you don't want your manuscript returned, just the business size SASE).
- 2-The usual AIDT rules apply: no undue violence, mayhem, torture, slavery or death, please!
- 3-No length restrictions but it would perhaps be best if you didn't try to write a novel!
- 4-The judging will be done as it was for #5: that is, my two suckers ... uh... friends have generously volunteered to judge the stories on a scale of 1-10 (I will be the 3rd judge). The winners will be determined by a tallying of the scores each story receives from the judges.
- 5-Winning stories, plus as many 'honorable mentions' as we can fit in the zine will be printed in AIDT #9.
- 6-Winners will be informed before AIDT #9 is in print.
- 7-Prizes will be awarded at the time of notification.
- 8-DEADLINE: October 31, 1987!

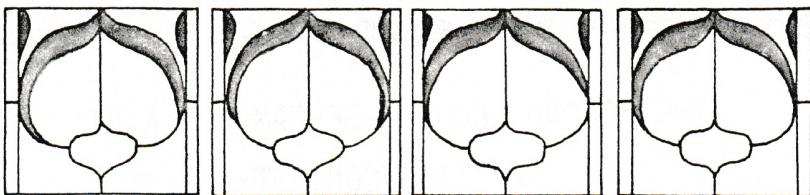
FIRST PLACE: \$100.00
SECOND PLACE: \$50.00
THIRD PLACE: \$25.00

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\$

* STORIES BASED ON THE CONTEST ILLUSTRATION BUT NOT ENTERED IN THE CONTEST ARE ALSO

VERY WELCOME!



THE RICHEST OF MEN

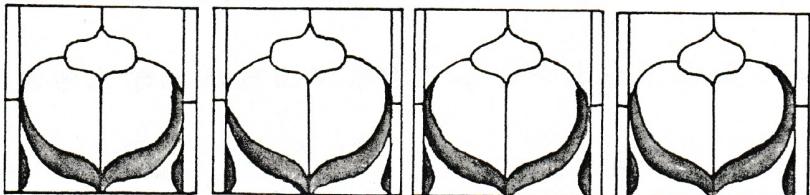
The light of the stars as they rest within your gaze
adding an unneeded lustre to golden glowing eyes.
The soft touch of sun-kissed brown curls
as they twine about my gently searching fingers.
Your wicked chuckles that fall on my ears like gentle rain
washing my heart clean of accumulated neglect.
The tender caress of rose-golden lips
as they feast hungrily upon my own starved mouth.
Husky-toned with passion, your vibrantly commanding voice
as it dances along my nerve endings....

The hypnotic fragrance of your body
flushed with the added warmth of lust.
Softly sweeping shadows cast by long lashes slowly lowered
to hide the passion lurking amidst the hazel depths.
The sight of your fingers clasped in mine, your fragile strength
sheathed in the embrace of Vulcan's exiled son.
Your manner of standing, hands resting on slim hips,
seeming so eager to leap into all the unknowns.
The supple slide of long muscles under silken tanned flesh
nestled quietly replete in my yearning arms....

You have breathed life into my cold frame and
brought a never-before known light into my dark.

You have given these gifts to me, the richest of men.

-- SHELLIE WHILD



TIGHT SPACES

Alexis Fegan black

The red earthen walls pressed close, strangling the ability to reason and stifling the air itself. Darkness rubbed against his cheeks, and the sound of his own breathing echoed all too loudly in his ears. His heart pounded, blood rushing like the crash of waves breaking on the shore in some violent storm.

He did not recall how far they had run, nor did he have clear recollection of how they had come to be in the cramped tunnel, crawling on hands and knees in an attempt to shield themselves from the crude fire-bombs which exploded on the surface.

All he could easily remember was the sound of Spock's voice, calmly informing him that the province in which they were travelling was at war with its closest neighbor. They'd come to Salem's World to negotiate a treaty between the planet and the Federation. One of the stipulations of that treaty stated that the inhabitants must be at peace among themselves -- as they apparently had been for some years.

The beam-down had come off according to schedule, the short walk to the Council Chambers in the city of Ninev had occurred without incident, and the crude streets filled with workers and children at play had given no hint that anything was out of the ordinary.

Until, Kirk amended, the first bomb dropped, spilling fire in the heart of the city, disrupting the fragile peace which had existed between the two provinces, and ultimately sending himself and Spock scurrying for the nearest available cover.

That cover, Kirk realized, came in the form of the natural earthen tunnel which now seemed to narrow and constrict around him, taking him back

to a moment in his early childhood. Suddenly, he was five years old again, crawling underneath the old wooden farmhouse which had been supported off the ground on sturdy cement blocks. At first, it had seemed such a fine little game -- hide and seek from his brother and two of the neighbor kids. And yet, as he'd crawled further underneath the house and the darkness had started to claw at his face like cruel barbed wire, he'd found himself paralyzed with terror.

No light had ever shone under the house, and the scent of spiders and musk had lingered like some haunting spirit. Cobwebs had brushed his cheeks, weaving a silvery net in his hair, over his face. And above him, the weight of the house pressed close. With his stomach pushed tight to the ground, his back scraping across the under-flooring of the house, he'd crawled madly, his sights set on a small crack of light on the opposite side of the structure where he knew the back porch to be.

And then, suddenly, the sand under his belly seemed to rise up, the under-flooring pinned his shoulders and pressed his cheek into the musky dirt, and his legs had flailed helplessly. He couldn't move. He'd heard himself breathing, heard Sam's voice still counting off to 100, heard the floor creaking as his father paced the wooden floor.

Time stood still while curious spiders and ants touched him as if to inquire as to his purpose. A field mouse skittered past his nose, its tiny voice screeching as it cursed at him for his intrusion. A fluttering of bat's wings caused him to shiver, and a thousand images of horror filled his mind. The floor creaked again, and thunder crashed as an afternoon storm sent rain pounding on the roof and echoing through his ears.

Rivulets of water crept silently past his limited field of vision, working their way into the dark soil which pressed against his cheek.

His chest constricted and, suddenly, he couldn't breathe, his lungs heaving, heart pounding, legs kicking frantically.

He didn't recall losing consciousness, didn't remember his father dragging him back to the well-lit world of reality by his tennis shoes.

"Captain?"

Kirk started at the nearness of Spock's voice, as well as at the hand which rested supportively on his shoulder. He realized abstractly that he was almost gasping for breath despite the fact that their hasty retreat into this constricting earthen tunnel had taken less than five minutes. Physically, he was unexerted, yet his body reacted as if he'd been running for miles.

In the compressed darkness, he could see nothing, and his stomach clenched as a thousand imagined horrors threatened to overshadow his usually strict mental disciplines.

With an effort, he concentrated on the hand which rested on his shoulder, telling himself that he was no longer 5 years old, reminding himself that his communicator was still firmly attached to his utility belt, his phaser already clutched in the palm of his hand.

A few moments later, by sheer force of will, he wrestled the uncanny sense of panic under control, closed his eyes and concentrated on bringing his breathing back to some semblance of normalcy.

"Sorry, Spock," he managed at last, his voice sounding all too loud and hollow as it echoed off the too-close walls.

"Are you... all right, Captain?" the soft-spoken voice inquired, the hand tightening just a little on his shoulder.

Kirk nodded, then realized the futility of it and spoke aloud. Every instinct he owned screamed to run -- yet simple math informed him that he couldn't even stand up in the short, narrow space. His heart thudded, his eyes widening to search the enveloping darkness. "Damn!" he swore, cursing himself for the claustrophobic reaction. "What the hell happened, Spock?"

"Apparently," the Vulcan replied, "the inhabitants of this planet have not yet made peace among themselves. I did not have time for extensive tricorder scans, yet I believe the explosions we witnessed were caused by bombs dropped from air-born carriers."

Kirk frowned into the darkness. In the distance, far above their heads in a world where the sun was undoubtedly shining, he could hear the rumble of still more explosions, the sound reminding him all too much of thunder -- the same thunder which had announced the rain when he'd been trapped under the old farmhouse.

He shivered involuntarily. "Can those explosions... collapse the tunnel?" he asked, attempting an air of nonchalance which he failed to pull off.

"Unknown at present, Captain," came the dark-shrouded response.

There ~~were~~^{was} a rustle of movement, and the hand which had held Kirk anchored in reality departed, leaving him curiously alone. He tried not to let the unruly panic overtake him, and was slightly relieved when Spock's squirming resulted in a faint blue glow of light emanating from the tiny screen of the tricorder.

The illumination was just sufficient for Kirk to see his first officer's face, though what awaited him there was far from comforting. Instead of the smooth angular planes, the tricorder's glow revealed a dark stream of blood flowing steadily from a cut just above the Vulcan's left brow.

Momentarily forgetting his own problems, Kirk took a deep breath, their eyes meeting in the pale blue light. "You didn't tell me you were injured, Spock," he said, keeping his voice low to avoid the threatening echoes which otherwise resulted in the confining space.

Spock's brows tightened, and for a moment he seemed not to understand. Then, lifting one hand to his face, he touched the cut with the back of his fingers, gazing curiously at the green stain which came away on his hand.

"Apparently my own clumsiness is at fault, Captain," he explained. "Obviously I failed to compensate for the decreased vertical clearance when we entered the tunnel."

Despite himself, Kirk smiled faintly. "You forgot to duck," he translated, satisfied that the wound seemed superficial.

"I believe I just said that, Captain," Spock agreed. Then, focussing on the tricorder, he dismissed the matter entirely. "According to these readings, the entire city of Ninev is under attack by both ground and air forces. Though the weapons are crude in comparison to our own technology, and do not pose any radiation threat either to ourselves or to the inhabitants of this planet, the seige will undoubtedly prevent us from leaving or from contacting the Enterprise."

Kirk's stomach clenched as he glanced sharply at the Vulcan. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Spock indicated the dim glow of the tricorder's readings with a nod of his head, and Kirk was hard-pressed to ignore the trickle of blood which still flowed from the inch-long cut. "The weapons being employed by the Salemites, while not radioactive in nature, are nonetheless of sufficient power to disrupt the normal signals of our communicators, Captain," the Vulcan explained. "Additionally," he continued, scanning the tunnel itself with the device, "the walls of this cavern are comprised of a variety of gemstones and minerals -- many of which also possess natural communications-dampening elements. According to my readings," he repeated with an utter calmness which amazed Kirk under the circumstances, "the tunnel continues for several miles, with an approximate 12 percent downgrade. If we continue on our present course, we will emerge approximately eleven miles from our current location."

Kirk blinked. The walls seemed to be moving. Closer. Ever closer. He swallowed hard, determined not to let panic overrule reason. "What about the emergency beacon?" he asked, automatically reaching for his communicator and activating the device without waiting for the Vulcan's response. The nearby darkness told him that it had to work, physics or not.

But Spock shook his head even as Kirk's communicator beeped softly to itself. "Under these conditions, Captain," he pointed out, "even the emergency frequency is being jammed. It is undoubtedly capable of penetrat-

ing the walls of this cavern, but the disruption on the planet's surface will scramble the code instantly."

For a very long moment, Kirk stared at the lit dial of the communicator, watching the frequency numbers stabilize, scramble, stabilize, scramble. Then, frustrated, he switched to the normal operating channel and spoke into the device, determined to reach the Enterprise if he had to shout loud enough to be heard even in the vacuum of space.

"Kirk to Enterprise," he tried, the seconds of silence lengthening into an eternity of echoes. "Scotty, can you hear me?"

The only response was a burst of static which caused him to jolt with its deafening loudness.

"A result of the bombings, Captain," Spock explained with utter calm. "Our transmission is being reflected back."

For a single moment, Kirk fought the urge to smash the communicator into a heap of microprocessors and rubble. Then, reminding himself that it could well be his only hope for the future, he released the expectant breath he'd been holding and replaced the device on his belt along with his phaser.

With an effort, he stifled the rising sense of renewed panic and forced his mind into the survival mode for which he'd been trained. "Suggestions, Spock?" he asked with as much calmness as he could muster.

Spock once again studied the tricorder, frowned, then looked up to meet Kirk's eyes. "Our alternatives are rather limited, Captain," he said presently. "This tunnel is part of a maze of underground caverns, and continues, as I said, for approximately eleven miles. Considering our current proximity to the bombings on the surface, we would perhaps be well-advised to keep moving."

"But?" Kirk prompted, hearing hesitation in the Vulcan's voice.

Spock glanced away for just a moment, seemed to be considering some unspoken thought, then continued haltingly. "The tricorder indicates that the corridor in which we are presently travelling narrows considerably up ahead," he returned noncommittally.

Kirk's lips tightened, pressing together. A quick glance at their present surroundings revealed that the clearance of the tunnel was approximately four feet from "floor" to "ceiling", and less than five feet across. He and Spock were sitting practically face to face, their knees already touching as the darkness reached toward them from all sides.

"How narrow?" Kirk asked at last.

"Vertical clearance lessens to approximately one meter, and horizontal clearance narrows to roughly the same."

With that, Kirk's eyes closed and he slumped wearily against the red-clay sides of the tunnel, fighting to ignore the crumbling earth dislodged as a result. Sounds were too loud, his breathing was too quick, his heart raced too fast. Overhead, like distant thunder, the crude fire bombs continued to fall, taking him back to his childhood, returning him to that moment in his life when he'd felt most trapped, most vulnerable.

He shivered again, then looked up to meet the intense dark eyes which reflected the tricorder's blue glow. "You sure you're all right to travel?" he asked, almost selfishly hoping the Vulcan's answer would be a negative one.

But Spock inclined his head, reaching up to touch the cut once again. "The bleeding is minor and easily controlled," he reported matter-of-factly. Then, eyes narrowing as he studied Kirk's face, he added, "And you?"

Denial sprang immediately to Kirk's lips, yet the look in the Vulcan's eyes told him that his best friend could be trusted with the truth. And yet, it wasn't easy to admit this childish weakness. He spoke haltingly. "I wouldn't exactly say that a hole through the center of the world is one of my strong points, Spock, but... if you think we're better off to keep moving, then that's what we do." It wasn't a thrilling prospect.

Spock studied him for what felt to Kirk to be a moment longer than necessary. Then, seeming to come to some unvoiced conclusion, he got to his feet and inclined his head toward the deeper part of the tunnel, bent almost double in the cramped, confining space. "If you have no objections, Captain," he suggested very softly, very gently, "Vulcan eyesight is somewhat more reliable in the dark." He paused briefly, then added: "I would recommend, however, that we remain in some type of physical contact; for as I have said, the tricorder indicates several smaller tributaries leading into this main corridor."

For the first time in his life, Kirk didn't argue, even in his own mind. Instead, he gratefully accepted Spock's round-about way of saying that he would go first. Then, taking a deep breath, he slipped his hand into the warmer-than-human grip, concentrating on that solid reality as the Vulcan shut off the tricorder and fastened it over one shoulder.

It occurred to Kirk as they moved through the increasingly narrow tunnel that Spock's hand was very much like an anchor -- steady, firm, confident. It also occurred to him that his own behavior was far from acceptable for a starship captain. He didn't have to like that fact, but attempting to deny it or rationalize it proved futile.

They continued walking in silence and darkness for more than an hour, and during that time, Kirk became increasingly aware of the ache in his

back from stooping, the burning fire in his legs from battling the downgrade of the tunnel's slope. Though the temperature in the tunnel itself was a constant 68 degrees on the Fahrenheit scale, sweat dripped from his brow due to the exertion, causing him to swear aloud as it burned his eyes.

Stopping momentarily, he ran the end of one sleeve across his face, somewhat surprised when Spock stopped and he sensed the Vulcan turn toward him in the darkness. The hand which had been holding his gave one reassuring squeeze, then released him, leaving him with a dreadful feeling of aloneness as the darkness and the nearness of the walls pressed against him. Instinctively, he fought the urge to grab at the Vulcan like some clinging vine, and took a deep breath to steady frazzled nerves.

The darkness was all-encompassing, penetrating, thorough. Yet it wasn't the lack of light which troubled Kirk. Rather, he knew, it was the nearness of the walls, the scent of musk and mystery which hovered in the tunnel like some sentient entity. He felt himself shivering, and wondered why Spock had let go of him.

"Spock?" He felt very much like a child for that single, almost desperate syllable which sounded far too loud in the constricting space.

"Here, Captain," came the soft-spoken response from less than a foot away.

There was a rustle of movement, followed by a dim light which appeared in Spock's hand. On closer inspection, Kirk realized that the illumination came from the Vulcan's communicator emergency light -- a tiny L.E.D. designed to produce approximately 10 watts of power. The problem, Kirk knew, was that the battery pack wouldn't last for more than three hours.

Putting that thought from his mind, Kirk took advantage of the dim glow to glance at their surroundings. The tunnel had narrowed considerably, and where the walls had been semi-smooth before, they were now far more eroded, composed of a red clay-like material imbedded with stones and veins of rock which glistened in the pale light.

As he listened, he also realized that the bombings had stopped -- or, he amended, they were far enough away from the source and deep enough underground that the noise could no longer penetrate. The air was cool, though completely still, and other than their own breathing, no sound came to his ears.

For a moment, the panic threatened to rise up again, but he held it at bay by sheer force of will, looking up at last to the Vulcan's face. The cut no longer bled, yet even in the dim light of the emergency pack, Kirk could easily discern the fatigue which was evident in the angular features. His own heart skipped a beat, raced, then slowed as he realized abruptly that Spock's breathing was elevated considerably, the broad shoulders trembling.

?

Putting his own concerns aside, he reached out instinctively to place one hand on the Vulcan's arm. "Spock?" he tried, keeping his voice low. "You all right?"

The dark eyes closed, and Kirk saw the Vulcan bite his lower lip in a gesture which bespoke an attempt at some type of control. For a very long time, the other man didn't answer. Then, taking a deep breath, he lowered himself to ^{the} tunnel's floor, sliding down the earthen wall until the long legs were drawn to his chest.

Kirk didn't breathe, sensing intuitively some terrible wrong. He slid to the ground at the Vulcan's side, his hand never leaving the other man's arm. Not knowing what else to do, he took the communicator and laid it on the ground to one side, its light creating a halo of illumination around them.

"Spock," he tried again, "what is it?"

The Vulcan shook his head as if to clear it, breathed deeply again, and wrapped both arms around his knees, hugging them to him. "I... do not know, Captain," he said at last, his voice hoarse and strained.

Kirk fought panic -- not only the panic of encroaching claustrophobia, but the panic of not knowing what had happened to Spock, apparently quite suddenly. "Are you... sick?" he asked, recalling that the Vulcan's hand had seemed to grow warmer as they walked/crawled through the tunnel. "What is it?"

Again, Spock shook his head, and Kirk noted that the Vulcan's eyes seemed distant, his gaze fixed on the craggy red-clay wall. He put one hand to his forehead, touched the edges of the cut, and examined the unblemished fingertips which came away. Kirk observed that his friend's hand trembled, and dropped at last into his lap.

"Spock?"

The Vulcan didn't reply. Instead, he lifted the tricorder, held it at a point near his own chest, and adjusted the complex series of dials. Then, gazing at the read-out, his brows lifted, dark eyes closing.

"Spock!" Kirk persisted, starting to wonder if he were a figment of his own imagination. "What's wrong?"

Setting the tricorder carefully aside, the Vulcan took another deep breath before responding. "Apparently," he began at last, his voice unsteady, "the cut was more... severe than I realized." He paused, seemed to tremble violently, then continued. "As I mentioned previously, Captain, the composition of the tunnel walls is a mixture of common clay, minerals, and assorted gemstones. If the tricorder's readings are accurate, it would

appear that trace elements of xenocyanide... are... present... in my bloodstream, obviously having entered through the cut I sustained when initially entering the... tunnel."

Kirk didn't move, didn't dare think of the horrors. Instead, he demanded what few facts might exist. Xenocyanide was a common poison found throughout the galaxy -- one which could easily kill if not treated immediately and with the proper antidote. And here, trapped in an underground tunnel with a war raging on the surface and the Enterprise unable to locate them, the possibility of such treatment seemed unlikely.

Unconsciously, he tightened his grip on the Vulcan's arm, trying to ignore the trembling which shook the other man's body and was subsequently reflected in his own. The walls were closing in again, the tunnel-artery constricting around him, choking the air from his lungs.

"We've got to risk going back the way we came," he decided aloud, forcing old command habits into place. "If we can get to the surface, the emergency beacon should be able to get through to the Enterprise even if normal communications channels are blocked."

But Spock was already shaking his head. His face was pale and drawn, his flesh clammy and feverish. "We cannot reach the surface by returning the way we came, Captain," he managed, the effort to speak seeming to extract a great toll.

Kirk's heart wrenched. "Why?" he demanded. "It's a hell of a lot shorter than trying to go on the way we've been going," he argued.

At that, the dark eyes focussed for just a moment as they turned to look at Kirk in the red dimness. "The mouth of the tunnel has collapsed, Captain," he said at last.

Kirk blinked, swallowing hard. "Wh-what?"

Spock indicated the tricorder with a gesture of his head. "The only way out is... ahead of us," he confirmed.

Muscles tightening, Kirk fought the sense of encroaching horror which rose as he realized Spock had known that little fact for some time. He didn't need to ask why the Vulcan hadn't told him sooner; the answer was written in the terror-etched lines on his face. His rampant claustrophobia was every bit as evident to Spock as it was to himself. And when he recalled that they had walked hand-in-hand for quite some time, he had no doubt that his childhood fears had transmitted themselves to the other man just as clearly as if they'd been inscribed in blood on the tunnel walls.

It also occurred to Kirk that Spock had seemed completely normal -- until they had stopped just minutes previously. He'd sensed no trouble in his friend as long as they'd been in physical contact.

Filing that thought away as irrelevant, he took a deep breath, trying to steady his admittedly frazzled nerves, trying not to think about the sealed entrance, trying not to imagine himself forever entombed in the bowels of some war-torn far-flung planet.

"How... how long... I mean... can you travel any further?" The idea of remaining where they were left him on the verge of mental collapse. Part of his mind laughed at the ludicrousness of it. He could command a starship, could match wits with Klingons and Romulans and Tholians. He could go EVA in a relatively fragile space suit and suffer no ill effects. But he couldn't, for the life of him, wrestle his fears under control now. The walls were too close. The air was too still. The scent of musk was too overwhelming. "Spock?" he tried again when the Vulcan failed to respond. "Are you able to travel?"

The real horror came with the Vulcan's reply. "No," he said very quietly. "I recommend that you take the tricorder and attempt to reach the surface alone, Captain."

Kirk's breathing stopped, his heart stood still, his muscles tensed until they ached. He realized abstractly that his fingers were digging deep into the Vulcan's arm and, with a supreme effort, he managed to loosen the bruising hold.

"I won't leave you here, Spock," he swore.

The Vulcan shook his head violently. "You do not understand, Captain," he said hoarsely, his entire body trembling with the effort required to speak. "As the fever increases, I will become delirious, perhaps violent." He paused as if to let that sink in. "I could seriously injure you without intending to." He shook his head again. "Please," he implored, "take the tricorder and continue."

Kirk didn't even hear the last sentence. His mind was too busy calculating reasons to disregard Spock's warning. And aside from that, he had already had it proven to himself that he couldn't continue on into that close-pressing darkness alone. Already, he could feel the cobwebs brushing his cheeks, already he could hear the sound of bat wings, already he could feel the arteries of this alien earth constricting around him like some deadly serpent. Even with the emergency light from his own communicator, he would have less than three hours of light. And after that, like it or not, his ability to reason would collapse.

"I... can't, Spock," he whispered, the words torn painfully from his lips.

Spock seemed not to understand. "You have no alternative, Captain," the Vulcan practically pleaded. "Already the fever has begun. If you remain, you will be endangering yourself unnecessarily on my behalf."

Kirk wasn't listening. He gazed off into the darkness in the direction they'd been heading. It was cold and deadly, like a great mouth waiting to swallow its victim. That realization left him silently angry, damning himself for his inability to control what should have been a normal fear.

Instead of trying to explain it, he turned again to Spock, noting the fixed stare in the dark eyes, the shallow breathing, the pallor of the skin. Even if he'd wanted to continue, the thought of leaving Spock here alone was unthinkable. With an effort, he forced himself to think rationally, searching for any possible alternative.

"I'm not leaving you, Spock," he repeated. "Call it Command Prerogative if you want," he added, knowing it was anything but, "but I'm not leaving you here alone." He didn't wait for an answer. "If you do get delirious, you could wander off into one of those tributaries you've been talking about and never find your way out again. And besides," he added, "even if I could make it to the surface, it would take days."

"One point eight days," Spock agreed, shivering.

Kirk wasn't sure whether the Vulcan was trying to contradict him or surrender, and decided it probably didn't matter. He steeled himself. "What can I do?" he asked.

Trembling violently, the Vulcan hugged his knees more tightly to his chest. "Unknown," he managed. "If it is xenocyanide poisoning, it would not be fatal to a Vulcan."

"But you're half human," Kirk pointed out, terrified all over again.

"An... inconvenience," Spock concurred. Then, taking a deep, shaky breath, he added haltingly: "If I were completely human, I would already be... dead. The poison is... quick-acting."

Kirk held his breath, noticing that his fingers were once again digging into the pliant flesh beneath the blue science tunic. It was obvious by Spock's condition that he was in no position to talk and, relying on his own basic survival training, Kirk forced himself to take what little action he could think of.

Not knowing what else to do, he maneuvered his body to sit in a cross-legged position in the center of the tunnel. Then, lifting his arms over his head and trying not to cringe as his fingertips brushed the too-close "ceiling" of the tunnel, he stripped off the gold command tunic, rolled it into a neat ball, then crawled back to Spock's side.

Slipping one arm behind the Vulcan's neck and flinching at the incredible heat which poured off the other's body, he eased his friend down onto the tunnel floor, sliding his own shirt under the dark head to form a

pillow of sorts.

It occurred to him that Spock was barely conscious, his breathing shallow and quick, his limbs experiencing occasional spasms as his body fought to overrule the poison coursing through his blood.

But as soon as Kirk positioned him comfortably and was kneeling at his side, the dark eyes flashed open and one powerful hand constricted on his wrist, bruising with Vulcan strength. The black gaze was filled with fire and danger, and there was no recognition in the deadly stare.

Forcing himself to hold his own control, Kirk glanced briefly at the hand which held his wrist, took a deep breath, then reached out with his other hand to smooth the sleek black bangs in a gesture of comfort.

"It's all right, Spock," he soothed, fighting not to wince as the pressure on his arm increased, threatening to snap the bone. "It's me. It's Jim." In the back of his mind, he realized that the fever had manifested with a suddenness unheard of in humans. And yet, Spock wasn't human. The Vulcan metabolism was nearly four times faster than his own and, subsequently, it stood to reason that it could take only minutes for the first symptoms to occur.

For a long moment, Spock's eyes remained locked with Kirk's, and the human caught himself wondering if they were both going to die here -- Spock of some alien poison, himself at the Vulcan's hands. And yet, as he recalled the pressing darkness of the tunnel which held them in womb-like fashion, he realized abstractly that it might be preferable.

His arm had grown numb, but he didn't try to pull away, just forced himself to remain still and pliant, relying on the natural link which had always existed between them. Terror clawed at his nerves, bringing the walls tumbling in closer, threatening to send his last vestiges of reason splintering in a thousand divergent directions.

He held on, telling himself that Spock had to live, they had to get back to the surface, they had to see the sun's bright light one last time. If they died then, so be it. But not here, not in this earthen-artery, not in the darkness which robbed them of sight and stole their lifeforce away.

"Spock," he tried again, stroking the other's forehead and trying desperately not to flinch against the piercing black stare or the iron-clad grip which numbed his fingers. "It's me," he repeated, not knowing what else to say. "I'm here. I'm not going to leave you, Spock. I'm right here."

He continued to croon in a soothing tone of voice for several minutes until, finally, the grip on his wrist loosened and his hand dropped without feeling into his lap. Already, he could see the dark red bruises, and winced involuntarily as the pins-and-needles sent blood stabbing back into

the seemingly lifeless hand.

Spock's head was tossing from side to side, his body arching as if in pain, his breath coming in harsh short gasps. And though Kirk had thought him beyond the ability to speak, he was startled when the Vulcan calmed slightly and their eyes met in the fading light of the communicator's emergency beam.

"Jim... you must... go," Spock pleaded, fever-tears slipping from the corners of his eyes as he reached purposefully for Kirk's injured hand and lifted it for inspection. "You... you do not... understand."

Kirk's brows narrowed, and he reached to soothe the other's brow, stopping when the Vulcan's arm blocked him. His stomach clenched, sending adrenaline surging through him, leaving him dizzy in its wake.

"You... do not... understand!" Spock repeated in a forced whisper-shout. "Fever... is... different for... Vulcans. Any fever...."

For a single moment, Kirk didn't understand. Then, very gradually, comprehension flooded him, leaving him cold and terrified and feeling five years old again. His eyes closed. His body shook. His stomach twisted. And with an accuracy which astounded him, something McCoy had once said came back to him. 'A fever's different with Vulcans, Jim,' the doctor had said. 'By nature, Vulcans don't get fevers -- and with damn good reason. Once the body temperature raises more than two degrees above normal, their entire hormonal balance goes completely out of kilter. Sort of like a false pon farr, if you will... or even if you won't. Usually the fever in itself isn't sufficient to kill, but it's damned uncomfortable for them... and damned embarrassing, I suppose.'

Kirk hadn't needed a detailed map. The rest had been obvious. Humans combatted a fever through perspiration. Vulcans had been known to combat it with sex -- often violent, unpredictable rape. With their minds clouded by whatever sickness raged through their body, the normal restraints were obliterated, leaving only savage instinct and often brutal solutions.

For a single moment, Kirk fought the overwhelming urge to run, winning the battle only when he realized he had nowhere to run to in the complex underground maze. And as he looked at the pale, drawn face of his best friend, his own problems paled by comparison. He felt strangely numb inside, as if all feeling had already been crushed by the pressing weight of the earthen tunnel, as if his reason had been strangled by the cool, still air, his own logic masked by the darkness which surrounded him.

He swallowed hard, his lips pressing tightly together with the effort to still the trembling in his own limbs. A quick glance at Spock revealed that the dark eyes were closed, the broad chest heaving in quick, shallow breaths. His hands were clenched into fists, opening and closing again, and his mouth worked as if to form words which never crossed his lips. His

hips strained and moved on the earthen floor of the tunnel, booteels digging into the hard-packed ground as the long legs thrashed.

Within himself, he could feel the tearing -- the instinctive fear brought on by the nearness of the walls, the logical fear which warned that Spock possessed more than twice his strength even in his incapacitated condition. And yet, it occurred to Kirk that he had no genuine desire to fight anymore. When Spock had held his hand during their extended journey into the bowels of this planet, he had felt more at peace, more secure than he had ever felt in his life. They had shared mind melds and chess games, had sipped brandy from the same glass, had slept in the same bed when duty demanded it.

Absently, he looked at his own hand now -- strangely empty and trembling. The bruises on his wrist were already starting to form, yet he smiled very faintly as a peculiar surge of feeling inundated him, echoed off the tunnel walls, and filled him again with the reverberation. The marks on his arm, he suddenly understood, were scars of desperation -- Spock's desperation and perhaps his own. The hand-print was, if nothing else, a physical reminder of the marks Spock had already made on his immortal spirit.

Drawing himself back to reality, Kirk shook his head, wondering if the oxygen had been sucked from the tunnel by some blind cave-bat mutated to tremendous size and living in the darkest corner of the deepest cavern in the most secluded crevice of the underground maze. The thoughts travelling through his mind at light-speed were anything but rational. At his side, his first officer and best friend lay gasping for breath while he sat pondering bruises which could have been considered a court-martial offense under other circumstances.

For a moment, his conviction wavered, and he forced himself to consider the alternatives more clearly. If he went for help, he might make it back in time to do some good. He might be able to summon the Enterprise and with any luck Scotty might be able to locate the Vulcan and have him beamed aboard.

On the other hand, he might not.

And as he peered into the darkness which pressed at the edges of the communicator's emergency light, he accepted the fact that he was in no condition to even make the attempt. Life or death would have to take their course here and now, with no attempts at heroics, no rank or title, no medical team standing by in the wings.

He glanced again at the Vulcan lying deathly still now on the earthen floor. Then, very tentatively, he reached out to rest one hand on the other's forehead, smoothing the silk-black bangs which had become disheveled in the extended thrashing. When Spock didn't move and the dark eyes didn't flicker open, Kirk took a deep breath and cast one last glance

toward the seemingly endless darkness.

Then, steeling himself and whispering a silent prayer to gods in whom he held no belief, he stretched out full-length at the Vulcan's side, reached over the other man to grab the communicator, and thumbed the switch which would extinguish the emergency beam. If they survived the next few hours, he told himself, they would need that light then.

But for now, he thought, fighting the chill of blackness which devoured him, life and death were best played out on a darkened stage.

He formed himself like a protective blanket over Spock, using the heat of his body to still the trembling in the other's body. The darkness caressed them as a single entity, binding them together like thick black glue. Once, Kirk felt the Vulcan move, felt the powerful arms rise around him with a suddenness and a strength which left him breathless.

Panic threatened to surface, for it was easy to imagine that the crushing weight was that of the tunnel -- collapsing over him, surrounding him, smothering the life from his lungs. Intellectually, he knew better, but emotionally the old childhood fears rattled through his brain like prisoners in an iron cage.

Bat wings fluttered nearby... but were, in reality, only the patter--slamming of his own heart. Cobwebs brushed his face and neck, and a spider-light touch caressed his cheek. His rational, adult mind told him it was only Spock's hand. His childhood memories conjured images of mutated tarantulas and three-legged rats who had escaped the mouse-trap and now sought revenge.

He drew a sharp breath as the world began to spin and shift, his eyes clenched tightly shut to create a darkness behind his eyes which was far more habitable than the real darkness in which he existed. Powerful arms tightened around him as he struggled to breathe, and he felt himself rolled abruptly onto his back, a crushing weight stifling the breath suspended in his lungs.

He started to shout, and then to scream, his head tossing from side to side on the hard-packed clay floor, his bare back being bruised and battered as reality collapsed around him.

He was five years old again.

Then, mercifully, the world ended in a searing flash of brilliant light which began at his neck and ended in unconsciousness.

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Time passed in darkness, with dreams of spiderwebs and a serpent constricting around him.

Seeking refuge, the viper entered him without pain, its first vicious bite anesthetizing reality.

He was warm inside, feverish, as the poison filled him.

Sleep came again.

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"Whoa there, Jim! Take it easy!"

The words meant nothing, but the hand which pressed against his shoulder and urged him down onto a surprising softness caused him to flinch, his eyes jerking open, then squinting shut against the intrusion of brightness.

Disorientation swallowed him for a moment and, gasping, he struggled to regain awareness, unconsciously twisting against the restraining hand.

"Take it easy, Jim," the familiar voice repeated. "You're back on the Enterprise."

It made no sense, but he opened his eyes nonetheless, fully expecting the consuming darkness to greet him. And yet, as consciousness gradually penetrated and awareness returned, he found himself gazing up into warm blue eyes.

"Welcome back, Captain," McCoy greeted with a grin as he bounced triumphantly on his toes.

Kirk blinked, staring. Memories were sparse and disjointed, but as he recalled his last few seconds of consciousness in the tunnel, his head jerked automatically toward the nearest bed, his heart constricting when he found it empty.

"Spock?" he managed weakly. "Is he...?"

McCoy's hand rested once more on Kirk's shoulder. "He's fine, Jim," the doctor reassured, then frowned deeply. "I tried to hold him here until you woke up, but the son of a bitch invoked regulations and went back up to the bridge almost the minute he regained consciousness." He paused for a moment, almost grimly, Kirk noted. "That little skirmish down there on the planet was apparently for your benefit, you know."

Too many things were happening at once, and Kirk held up one hand for a halt, his muscles protesting as he tried to sit up. For a moment, he found himself at war with McCoy as the doctor voiced his usual protests; but, with practiced perfection, one of his warning looks recruited grumbling assistance as he leaned against the head of the bed.

Dizziness was the first symptom of his hasty decision, and he took just a moment to combat it. When he could see straight, he looked up once more to McCoy. "You want to tell me what's going on, Bones?" he tried. "I don't have time to play twenty questions."

McCoy grumbled under his breath, sighed heavily, then pulled out a nearby stool and sat down. "To make a long story short, Jim," he began, "it seems that Ninev's neighboring province isn't altogether thrilled at the prospect of a treaty with the Federation. You can get the details from Scotty, but the gist of it is that their economy is dependent largely on the manufacture and sale of weapons. As they see it, a peace treaty would seriously disrupt their economical status." He shook his head. "So... it seems they felt they were more or less being forced into the treaty -- and figured the best way to avoid it would be to obliterate the city of Ninev as well as two Federation representatives." He shrugged. "Like I said, you can talk to Scotty about it later."

Kirk considered that. Something had been fishy from the beginning. More of a job for ambassadors rather than Starfleet personnel. But he turned his attention once again to more personal concerns.

"What about... Spock?" he asked. "I assume he was fit for duty or you wouldn't have released him."

McCoy frowned once more. "Short of sedating him, I didn't see any way of holding him here, Jim," he revealed. "Starfleet was on one channel demanding an update on the Salem situation, and the Federation was making noises on another channel. Not to mention that the Ninev Council and several other planetary governmental bodies were all on the verge of declaring war on the other. At last word from the bridge -- which was less than an hour ago -- everything was under temporary control, and the Enterprise has been discharged from the mission." He took a deep breath, brows narrowing as he studied Kirk more carefully. "Now," he said pointedly, "let's talk about you."

Kirk's mouth opened to protest -- though against what he wasn't certain. "What do you mean, Bones?"

McCoy glowered. "Don't give me that 'what do you mean, Bones', crap, Jim," he returned with seeming weariness. "And don't flutter those eyelashes at me either." He glanced momentarily about the room, seemed satisfied that they were alone, then leaned closer until his elbows rested on his knees. "The fact of the matter is that something pretty strange happened down there. Spock isn't talking, but that's not terribly unusual. You, on the other hand, probably should talk."

Despite himself, Kirk's face darkened and he found himself unable to hold the penetrating blue stare. "There's nothing to say, Bones," he snapped. "We were in an emergency situation, our survival was the paramount

issue, and since we're both here and alive, the details are academic."

McCoy drew back. "You sing and dance better than Shirley Temple, Jim -- which isn't saying much."

Kirk ignored the remark, the name meaningless to him. He squirmed internally, then steeled himself as he puffed out his chest and assumed a typically male attitude. "Nothing happened that we can't deal with."

McCoy scoffed. "Bullshit."

Kirk's brows lifted as anger surged through his chest. "Drop it, Bones," he warned.

"Is that what you intend to do?"

"It's what I have to do."

"Then you're blind as well as a fool."

At that, Kirk tried to get up off the bed in preparation to stalk huffily from the room, but stopped when McCoy's hand appeared in the middle of his chest and pinned him down. He glared at the restraining arm, considered struggling, then thought better of it when McCoy glanced purposefully toward a tray of loaded hypos.

Frustration and a sense of helplessness pervading him, Kirk sank back onto the pillow, taking a personal vow of silence.

"The facts are pretty straight-forward, Captain," McCoy said after a moment of loaded silence. "When we beamed you aboard, you had all the symptoms of a man having a psychotic episode -- a reaction to severe claustrophobia in my medical opinion," he commented quietly. "Add that to the fact that, as your doctor, it's not hard for me to deduce that you've been raped, and that pretty much says it all."

He said it with such utter calmness that Kirk didn't bat an eye. "So what's the problem?" he snapped sarcastically.

McCoy wasn't fazed. "The problem, Captain, Sir, is that I don't buy your no-problem act for a minute." He paused to let that sink in. "Now, you can either tell me what really went on down there, or I can hook you up to the vid-scan for a complete memory search."

Kirk's stomach tightened unpleasantly. He had no doubt that McCoy would carry out his threat if necessary. Finally, he sighed heavily, reaching back in time in an attempt to retrieve some shred of meaningless information which might satisfy the doctor's prying. "You're the physician," he said at last. "And you're the one who told me about what a fever can do to a Vulcan. I don't see why it comes as any great surprise to you

that this... happened."

McCoy shook his head. "It doesn't," he agreed, much to Kirk's shock. "What does surprise me is your clam-lipped attitude. I should think you'd have some small degree of feelings on the matter."

At that, Kirk looked up into the demanding blue eyes, weariness and anger blending to a volatile mixture. "If I do, Doctor, it's something I have to work out for myself, or with Spock, isn't it?"

McCoy shrugged nonchalantly. "I'm not arguing that, Jim," he said, remarkably unflustered. "All I'm saying is that, as Chief Medical Officer on this ship, I have people to answer to as well. My medical reports are a matter of record at this point -- and they state simply that the Captain of the Enterprise was beamed aboard in a half-catatonic state, bruised and scraped from head to toe, and babbling incoherently." He paused once more as if to let those statements penetrate Kirk's thick resistance. Then, without breaking eye contact, he continued. "As you well know, I can't alter those records, and plenty of questions are going to be asked if that report is submitted as it stands now. If you're at all interested in saving your command image -- and Spock's professional hide, I might add -- it would make it easier for me to smooth it out with the Surgeon General's office if you would be a little more cooperative."

It would have been a relatively simple matter for Kirk to believe that McCoy's personal curiosity was more of a factor than medical records; but in the interests of salvaging their working relationship as well as their friendship, he softened just a little.

"You already know what happened, Bones," he said quietly. "And you're the doctor, not me." He paused, recognizing the old familiar tactics of evasion surfacing once more. Then, forcing himself to remember that McCoy was a friend as well as a fellow officer, he chose another approach. "Look, for what it's worth, I had a decision to make in that tunnel. I could either leave Spock behind and try to reach the surface alone -- which would probably have resulted in both of us getting killed. Or I could stay with him... knowing the possible consequences." He hesitated as the full implications returned gradually. "I made a command decision," he repeated almost coldly. "Whatever happened down there... wasn't Spock's fault."

McCoy's brows tightened as silence lingered between them for a moment. "I seriously doubt that he'd agree with that."

Kirk glanced up sharply.

The doctor shrugged in response, indicating the empty bed to Kirk's right with a nod of his head. "Have you ever known him not to be hovering around here like a worried columbalat when you were unconscious?"

Kirk's stomach clenched as his jaw tightened. He glanced purposefully

toward the door. Until that moment, he'd tried not to think about the possible emotional/mental ramifications of the events on the planet's surface. Somehow, he'd expected them to pick up exactly where they'd left off -- back to the routine of starship duty, back to the late night chess games, back to the comfortable rapport which had always existed between them.

He took a deep, shaky breath, wishing his memories were more intact. Then, turning back to McCoy, he made his demands. "Release me, Bones," he said quietly.

The doctor stared at him for a long, silent minute. "What do you plan to do?" he asked at last.

Kirk's face didn't betray the emotion he was experiencing. "I don't know yet," he confessed honestly. "If Spock seems willing to talk, I suppose we'll discuss... it." His face darkened. "If he doesn't, then there's not much anyone can do about it, is there?"

McCoy seemed unconvinced, but nonetheless slipped one arm around Kirk's back and hoisted him up until his feet touched the floor. "You really don't want to talk about it, do you?" he pressed.

Leaning on the doctor's arm for a moment to steady himself, trying not to wince against the protesting pain in his legs, Kirk sighed heavily. "There's nothing to discuss, Bones," he said at last, facing the truth.

When Kirk could stand on his own, McCoy let go, and hurriedly returned with a clean uniform which he handed to the other man. "What do you mean 'nothing to discuss'?" he asked.

Kirk's eyes closed. The darkness was there. The tunnel walls and the silence and the arteries of some alien world closing around him. The memories, on the other hand, were a blur.

Finally, looking up, he met McCoy's eyes and compelled himself to truth. "I lost consciousness," he confessed. Then, as an afterthought, he added: "And maybe it's better that way."

McCoy drew back, one brow on the rise. "You mean you were made to lose consciousness," he corrected. "Claustrophobia or no, you're not the type to pass out like some half-witted school-girl."

Kirk glanced up sharply, his stomach knotting until he was dizzy. It wasn't a fact he wanted to remember. If he'd simply passed out, that was one thing. But the fact that Spock had taken the memories from him by making certain he was in no condition to remember made it worse.

He felt cheated.

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Alone in his quarters, Kirk paced restlessly, glancing at the chronometer from time to time as the minutes crawled by with painful slowness. On McCoy's orders, he'd bypassed the bridge, having been assured by Uhura that everything was under control.

He noted that Spock hadn't answered his summons personally and that detail irritated him even further. For a moment, he found himself facing a fitful anger once more. The Vulcan apparently thought he could handle it (whatever "it" was, Kirk added to himself), yet his attitude seemed to say that a "mere human" was best left in the dark.

Condescending bastard, he thought to himself, his hands clenching to fists as he pondered the events which had transpired between them. I've heard of wham-bam-thank-you-Jim before, but never like this!

What bothered him all the more was not knowing whether the Vulcan's avoidance of him was because of embarrassment, shame or simple revulsion. Despite their years of close friendship, they'd never discussed sexual preference before. It was entirely possible, Kirk conceded, pacing more quickly, that Spock found the physical encounter repulsive, aberrant, disgusting. In the Vulcan's mind, it was conceivable that the entire scenario had been played out completely logically. Already he could hear his friend's explanation. 'As I am a valuable member of the Starfleet, Captain, and as you saw fit to offer yourself, the only logical solution was that I bang your brains out to spare Starfleet the time and expense of replacing a trained officer'.

A nice, logical little explanation. A quick, painless little episode acted out in the dark. Spock lived. Kirk lived. And Starfleet got to keep two good officers.

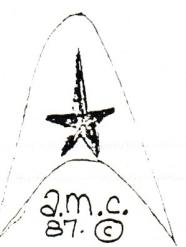
Sweet.

Except for one thing, Kirk amended. He felt used. And cheated of the memories. And the anger came with knowing it could have been -- should have been -- different.

Any fuck in a pinch, is that it, Spock? he wondered sarcastically. And in this case, a neck pinch to go with the fuck. Saves your precious dignity. Saves my command image. Saves my 'Captain Courageous' image for you. Hell, you probably think I was still a virgin, that I don't masturbate, and that I don't go to the bathroom. And you wanted to keep it that way. Nice and neat. No strings. No attachments. No memories. Damn you!

Impulsively, he slammed his fist against the wall, wincing as his knuckles came away bloody. It occurred to him that he was acting like some jilted lover, that his behavior was no more acceptable for a starship captain now than it had been in the claustrophobic tunnel.

He didn't particularly care. The anger wouldn't let him care.



Another glance at the chronometer revealed that the first duty shift had been officially over for more than a half hour and, with that knowledge, he strode purposefully toward the communications panel on his desk, determined suddenly to confront Spock. He would state his peace -- or shout it, he amended -- if for no other reason than to satisfy himself.

But even as his thumb contacted the intercom switch which would connect him to the Vulcan's quarters, the door chime sounded noisily for attention. He stopped with his hand in mid air, blood surging as he stared suspiciously at the closed door.

"Come," he snapped, then stood straight and dragged his knuckles across his civilian jeans to dry the light sheen of blood.

What surprised him was when he saw his first officer silhouetted against the brighter light of the corridor. The Vulcan stood stone-stiff, and stepped just far enough into the room to trip the sensor and cause the door to close behind him.

Kirk held his breath, the color draining from his face as he noted the official form in the Vulcan's hand. *So that's the coward's way out, he thought, anger surging once more. Hand in your resignation and transfer to another ship or go back to Vulcan. You bastard!*

Unconsciously, Kirk squared his shoulders, meeting the cold dark eyes in a steady, war-like stare. "Yes, Mister Spock?"

The Vulcan didn't move except to lift one brow at the obvious hostility in Kirk's tone. "If you are busy, Captain," he offered quietly, "I could return another time."

It was the wrong thing to say and Kirk bristled. A part of him knew he was being unfair to the Vulcan, yet another part didn't care. He wanted to hurt Spock, partially for revenge, partially out of his own hurt.

"I'm not busy," he said. "Sorry to disappoint you."

The long brow lifted higher. Then, almost imperceptibly, the Vulcan relaxed his stance and took a deep breath which came out sounding like a very human sigh. "I... regret that you are... troubled by events on the planet's surface, Captain," he began haltingly. "The situation was... most unfortunate."

Kirk stared at the other man without blinking. His anger was dangerously close to the surface, and he took a few steps forward until they stood face to face. "'Most unfortunate,'" he repeated. "Is that how you see it?"

"Sir?"

Kirk stiffened, gazing into the impassive angular features. "You were hoping I wouldn't remember it, weren't you?" he pressed.

Spock's eyes closed for just a moment and he glanced away, giving Kirk the illusion of winning half the battle. Then, just as suddenly, his shoulders squared. "You elected to remain with me despite my warning, Captain," he said, his voice quietly dangerous. "Obviously, you were aware of the possibilities, yet you chose to stay." He paused as if to let that sink in. "While I am regretful of any... discomfort -- either physical or mental -- I may have caused you, I fail to see why, under the circumstances, you were... surprised."

Kirk's jaw dropped. He blinked and stopped breathing. The cold son of a bitch was, in his own round-about way, saying, 'I told you so'. Not only did that realization cause Kirk's anger to boil to the surface, but it also wrenched a psychic pain from the deepest part of his immortal spirit.

"Damn you, Spock!" he swore, hands clenching helplessly into fists. "Is that all it meant to you?" He didn't wait for a reply. "I thought we were...." It sounded so trite, but he said it anyway. "I thought we were friends!"

"We were," the Vulcan agreed without hesitation. "And it is my hope that we remain such. The... incident... is perhaps best forgotten. As I have said, I am... sorry."

Eyes widening, Kirk didn't move. "Sorry?" he repeated. "For which one of us?" Again, he didn't wait for an answer. "Hell, I was apparently so repulsive to you that you had to send me off to oblivion just so you could stomach fucking me. Granted, you're not human and I'm not Vulcan, but I never would have believed that gender would have made any difference to either one of us!"

"Apparently," Spock said with utter calmness, "it made a difference to you."

Kirk's tirade was halted in mid-stride. "Wh-what?"

Stiff-backed and solemn, Spock stared at the floor. "Though my recollections of the incident are understandably sparse, I do remember that my touch was... disturbing to you."

Though it was obviously difficult for Spock to speak of such personal matters, Kirk pressed the matter harder. "That's a lie and you know it!" he snapped. "As I recall, you never gave either one of us a chance to see what might have happened. No, not you," he added, shaking his head adamantly. "It was easier to just neck pinch me and take the easy way out! Which is what I presume you came here for tonight," he added, indicating the unmentioned form still clutched in Spock's hand. "Well, I won't accept

your resignation, Mister!" he snarled hotly. "You can take that piece of paper, fold it five ways and shove it--."

With an effort, he stopped himself there, tried to wrestle his rampaging emotions under control, and failed miserably. "You can't run away from this ship, Spock," he said, trying another angle. "Like it or not, you're stuck with me for the duration."

Spock's brows lifted and in the dark eyes, Kirk could see the barest beginnings of a smoldering fire. "I have no intention of resigning, Captain," he returned, his voice taking on a slight edge. "And as to my purpose in coming here this evening, it was simply to deliver this Dismissal of Duties form to you regarding Salem's World. The Enterprise has been relieved of any further obligations, and as per Starfleet's orders, we are enroute to Rigel V for one week of ship-wide leave."

Kirk hadn't heard anything other than the first sentence. Somehow, he'd almost wanted Spock to try to resign. At least then, he thought irrationally, it would have given them something to fight about. As it was, Spock's ice-cold demeanor left him even more frustrated than he'd been previously.

Impulsively, he snatched the form from the Vulcan's hand, tossed it in the general direction of his desk, and stared again into the dark eyes. Spock was shielded, unreadable.

"Was there anything else, Spock?" he demanded.

"That was my only intention when I came here," the Vulcan returned icily.

Kirk's jaw twitched. "Fine," he concluded. "I'm sure you know the way out." And with that, he turned his back on the other man and strode into the living area of his quarters, listening for the satisfying sound of the door closing behind the Vulcan. But his curiosity piqued when that familiar sound failed to manifest. He turned and, much to his surprise, found Spock less than a foot behind him.

"Obviously," Spock said when their eyes met, "this matter is not ended."

And for the first time in his life, Kirk found himself actively afraid of the Vulcan. But his determination and anger kept that fear from reaching a visible surface level. "I have nothing more to say on the subject, Spock," he replied, puffing out his chest like some wounded animal attempting to appear larger than its actual size. "Get out."

But Spock didn't budge. "I do have something to say, Captain," the Vulcan returned. "And since the incident did involve both of us, you will hear me out!"



Kirk felt the color drain from his face, saw the fire burning in coal-black eyes. He didn't reply, just stood there feeling terribly vulnerable and increasingly angry.

"You have, in your usual fashion, reached the wrong conclusion based on erroneous facts," Spock began. "Despite what you may believe, my decision to render you unconscious was not based on any revulsion on my part. Rather," he continued, his voice somewhat louder than normal, "it was based on the fact that you began struggling against me after you have essentially agreed to the consequences of remaining with me rather than continuing on by yourself.. Due to the fever, I was not myself, and did not possess the ability -- nor the time -- to reason with you." He paused for only a moment. "Once you lost consciousness, I apparently... raped you." The hesitation was barely noticeable, but Kirk noted it nonetheless.

"I have no specific memories of the incident myself, for the fever was sufficient to create a rather severe delirium. When I awakened, I found you several meters away, pressed into a crevice in the tunnel's wall, gasping as if you were unable to breathe. I managed to activate the emergency beacon on the communicator and, fortunately, the bombings had ceased and we were of sufficient distance away that the Enterprise was able to lock onto us and beam us aboard." He hesitated once more, then added: "Before beam-up, it was obvious by your behavior that my very presence was a source of distress to you -- and with understandable cause. You were incoherent, and essentially asked me to leave you alone, not to touch you, and other commands which I do not care to repeat."

Kirk stared at the other man for a very long time. His face heated. It was starting to make sense and he didn't like the implications. "You really don't get it, do you?" he said.

"Obviously not," Spock agreed, his voice tinged with an edge of frustration.

Kirk's eyes closed and he sighed heavily. "It wasn't you I was fighting, Spock," he managed at last. "From what little I remember, it was.... Well, when you... um... rolled over onto me, I... panicked."

"Obviously."

It was the wrong thing to say and, abruptly, Kirk's anger flared again. "If you'd stop being so goddamn superior for one minute, you might understand something, Spock!"

Kirk's greatest shock came when the Vulcan's hand lifted at lightning speed and the powerful fingers constricted about his wrist, taking him back to that crossroad-moment in the tunnel. He couldn't speak.

"I do not know what you expect of me, Captain," the Vulcan snarled,

his eyes narrowing to slits as his grip tightened. "If this is some type of human 'game', I am not--."

"Game!" Kirk exploded, wrenching his arm but to no avail. Spock's grip held him tight. "Is that what you think? The game began when you changed the rules! We could have learned to deal with it. But you were more concerned with maintaining your superiority act than with our friendship! I can hear it now: 'I shall render the poor human unconscious to spare his feelings!'" Well bullshit! The only feelings you spared were your own! I suspect it's a hell of a lot easier to make love to a limp rag doll than to a real person, so I shouldn't be surprised!"

"I would hardly call what occurred between us 'making love', " Spock countered, his hand tightening until Kirk winced. "It was an act of survival for both of us."

At that, losing all semblance of reality, Kirk watched as his fist drew back in seemingly slow motion and abruptly impacted with Spock's jaw. The force was sufficient to knock the Vulcan away, and with his arm freed, Kirk was on the other man instantaneously. Sanity left him, and he hurled himself against Spock with his full strength.

Then, in a blinding flash, he collided full-force with reality as steel-strong arms constricted around his waist, blocking his attack and wrestling him to the cold hard floor of his cabin. He didn't know what he'd expected, but it hadn't been this. Somehow, he'd imagined Spock just standing there, taking it, apologizing profusely for causing the fight, then slinking back to his quarters with his tail tucked neatly between his long legs.

Instead, the Vulcan's weight covered Kirk, pinning him face-down to the floor as a good portion of the breath was crushed from his lungs.

"Do you enjoy this, Captain?" Spock's voice wondered with unveiled sarcasm. "Is it easier for you to fight with me than to accept the feelings between us? It could have been different!"

Kirk's face darkened and he struggled pathetically, fruitlessly. It didn't matter that Spock's words held an awful ring of truth. It mattered only that he was suddenly claustrophobic again, his will taken from him by the crushing weight of reality. His eyes closed and he summoned up the last vestiges of strength, trying to force the Vulcan away from him by will alone.

"Goddammit, Spock, I'll have you court-martialed for this! Assaulting a fellow officer is--."

"Do not threaten me, Captain," Spock interrupted, twisting one arm up behind Kirk's back until the pain stopped him cold. "It is also a court-martial offense to endanger a fellow officer through negligence. You chose

to remain with me in that tunnel when, logically, you should have made an attempt to reach the surface. Why?" he pressed, his mouth threateningly close to Kirk's ear. "Why did you stay?"

Eyes clenching tightly shut, Kirk confronted the truth with a sense of profound horror. "Because I couldn't go on!" he snarled. "Is that what you wanted to hear? I stayed with you because it was the lesser of two evils." The minute the words were out of his mouth he regretted them. His sanity was crumbling again, and his emotional walls with it. "I physically couldn't crawl through that goddamned tunnel alone, okay? I was fucking terrified -- something you couldn't possibly understand! Claustrophobia isn't logical," he snapped, almost gagging on the word. "So I'm not perfect, and I have my little phobias, too. But I guess that makes me a lousy captain in your eyes."

For a very long time, there was no response. Finally, it came in the form of a whispered, spine-tingling softness. "No," Spock said, sounding only slightly surprised. "It makes you... human."

In Kirk's current mental condition, the soft-spoken words sounded more like an insult than a statement of fact. And with that remark hanging in the air, Spock's grip loosened and Kirk slumped dumbfounded to the floor as the Vulcan sank to his knees less than a foot away.

But in his present state, the human was in no condition to fully understand the implications. The one thought which went through his mind was that he was free and, acting on that knowledge, he rolled onto his back and tried to stand. But the hand he used to push up with collapsed under his own weight, the bruised muscles refusing to hold him. He landed on his backside with a curse, not even looking at the Vulcan who sat with his head bowed a few inches away.

His heart pounded. His eyes blazed with unshed tears which he tried to blame on his own anger. "I thought we were friends, goddammit!" he repeated, his voice choking on the words. "And you're right: it could have been different. I could have loved you, but you were too scared to give me the chance!"

The second the words tumbled head-long from his lips, Kirk found himself faced with the truth. It bound and tied him, bringing the claustrophobic reaction back full force. The first truth was that he did love Spock -- as more than a friend, more than a brother. The second truth was that the responsibilities which went with that love scared him to death, causing his lungs to constrict with the same terror he'd felt in the tunnel.

Without knowing why, he tried to recover, stumbling over his words like rocks in the path of his tongue. "What I mean is that neither of us understood the other down there in that hell-hole, Spock," he stammered. "You thought I was struggling against you when in reality it was the goddamn tunnel I couldn't cope with. I know that may not make sense to a

Vulcan. Space is space, after all. Doesn't matter if there's a hundred yards over your head or less than a centimeter. I know all that. But when I felt your weight on top of me, it was as if the whole world caved in. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I couldn't move. Yes, I fought -- but not against you." It occurred to him that he was digging himself even deeper, but it no longer seemed important. If nothing else, he had to understand it for himself, had to shout out his fears to purge them from his heart. "At the time, I... I didn't even know it was you, Spock," he confessed. It hurt to realize how true that statement was. "It... it should have been different."

Spock remained silent for a long moment, the dark head bowed. Then, very slowly, he looked up, the dark-fired eyes locking with Kirk's. "And now?" he asked.

Kirk blinked, brows narrowing to a quizzical frown. The anger and the fight had left him and he was curiously alone inside, his soul aching with imagining what might have been. "I... I don't understand."

Spock's eyes closed, then opened again. His mouth worked as if to speak, but no words parted his lips for several seconds. Finally, taking a deep breath, he spoke very succinctly. "You said that you could have... loved me," he replied with only a slight hesitation. "Can you... now?"

Face darkening to crimson, Kirk found himself without a reply. What surprised him was the reaction of his own body. A surge of adrenaline poured through him, raising the hairs on the back of his neck and sending a chill darting the length of his spine. He felt remarkably like an ogre for his tirade. And he also felt completely in the dark -- an emotional mire so deep that its blackness overshadowed even that of the tunnel.

"I... uh... I've always loved you, Spock," he said, choosing the coward's way out. "You're... like a part of me."

But Spock shook his head, the dark eyes never wavering. Fire blazed in their depths -- under control now, but nonetheless still smoldering, waiting to burst into flames. "Please, Jim," he said in a remarkably gentle contrast to his expression, "do not toy with me."

Kirk started to protest, then lowered his eyes in concession. His palms were sweaty, his skin cold and clammy. His heart was making thundering noises in his ears. And the truth kept slapping him hard across the face. "I'm not sure... I'm really not sure, Spock," he repeated, "what you're... asking." His mind called him a liar, but he ignored it, wanting to hear it from Spock's own mouth.

The Vulcan didn't move except to sigh heavily, almost in obvious frustration which would have been more at home on a human. "I am asking," he said very softly, "if you could... feel for me... as I feel for you."

Kirk's heart skipped several beats, then pattered hard to catch up with reality. He looked up to find the dark eyes studying him cautiously. And something in the Vulcan's gaze compelled him to the total truth. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "But...." His voice trailed off and he swallowed with difficulty. "But... if you'll give me a chance... I'd like to find out."

Spock seemed to consider that. Then, with a quickness which surprised Kirk, the Vulcan leaned forward, took both of his wrists, and carefully pushed him down onto the floor. Their faces were inches apart, and Spock's breath was hot as it caressed his cheek.

For a single moment, Kirk considered asking, 'What are you doing?', then thought better of it as he realized the obvious answer. And yet, with his wrists pinned above his head and Spock's weight pressing against his chest, he felt the panic starting to rise.

But even as his eyes widened, twin brows slanted higher beneath the sleek black bangs. "Please," Spock implored, releasing one wrist and using the free hand to caress Kirk's cheek. "Trust me."

Kirk's eyes closed. The butterflies in his stomach almost knocked him out as they kicked him in the ribs. He held his breath. "Damn," he swore to himself, biting his lip until it hurt.

"You are afraid," Spock noted, holding one wrist firmly to the floor, still stroking Kirk's cheek with one hand.

He didn't have to like it. "Yes," he admitted. "I'm afraid, Spock."

"Of me?"

Kirk considered that and realized that his free hand was still resting on the floor, relaxed, at ease. "No."

"Of what, then?"

Drawing a sharp breath, Kirk tried not to let the encroaching panic overtake him. "I... I'm not sure," he confessed. "Of losing control, maybe. Of being in a position of... weakness... vulnerability." His face heated with the admission of his own humanity.

"Or being hurt?" Spock pressed, running his fingers through the liquid-gold hair.

Kirk swallowed hard, his few scant memories reminding him of the Vulcan's greater strength, his unpredictable nature. But he owed Spock the truth. "Yes," he said very quietly, damning himself. "I'm... afraid of... tight spaces."

"Meaning... love?" Spock wondered, driving his point home.

Kirk's eyes closed. "Maybe... I dunno." He was hard-pressed to ignore the sensations Spock's fingers were creating as they skimmed through his hair, over his cheeks, down his neck and shoulders, then retraced their journey with exacting precision. His body wanted very much to respond, yet his mind rebelled in terror. "Sometimes... sometimes I guess it's easier when I'm not in control," he suddenly understood, the words escaping before he could call them back. "Sometimes it's... easier when there's no... choice."

Spock's lips curved upward just a little, sending a chill darting through Kirk's limbs. This wasn't the shy, inexperienced Vulcan he had believed to exist. Rather, he knew, this was Spock -- a sentient being in search of love, with the ability to take that love if necessary. Vulcan or human made no difference. Logic and emotion could blend with the proper ingredients of trust and intuition.

Kirk held his breath.

And Spock stroked his face once more. "Trust me, Jim," the Vulcan repeated.

Kirk was grateful that, in his own mind, he had no choice. The feel of Spock next to him was as comforting as it was terrifying and he realized it was the combination of fear and excitement which had always brought the greatest gratification. Already his body was responding, his mind tripping over itself as he realized he'd been unconsciously courting -- teasing -- Spock for longer than he could recall. The tunnel had been no exception. He'd chosen to stay in full awareness of the dangers. And some part of him had been thankful that the decision had finally been made, that the choice had been taken away from both of them and left in the hands of some higher authority.

Finally opening his eyes, he took a deep breath as he gazed up into the expectant dark globes. There was love there, as well as fiery passion. There was danger as well as protection. And there was, Kirk suddenly knew, unlimited space, ultimate freedom.

Abruptly, the claustrophobic fear of commitment left him and, in full awareness of what he was doing, he closed his eyes and lifted his mouth to be kissed, revelling in the crushing weight of the Vulcan which pressed him into the floor, rejoicing in the freedom he attained through captivity.

One thing which surprised Kirk was that their first kiss was anything but gentle. Their lips collided roughly, mouths opening to one another as if they'd been planning this moment for years. Tongues became warring probes, seeking and searching, struggling for dominance, exploring new territories and recording sensations for future reference.

Immediately, Kirk responded fully, overwhelmed by the utter maleness of Spock, the power and the strength which coursed through the lean, hard body. The Vulcan could break him in half with one hand. Or put him quietly to sleep and take his own pleasure freely as he'd done once before. Spock could obliterate his memories with a touch, wipe life itself from his body, perhaps with nothing more than a thought.

The kinky thrill came with knowing he wouldn't. Probably. Not without good reason. Hopefully.

Kirk gasped at that knowledge, his hips lifting as a familiar fire built in his groin. "I trust you, Spock," he promised, as excited by the danger as by the physical stimulation. I have to....

The next thing he was aware of was being on the bed. It happened so quickly that he lost track of the details. At some point, Spock ^{had} lifted him from the floor as if he were a feather. The beautiful, powerful hands undressed him with slow deliberation. The hot mouth teased over his chest and neck, tongue probing at nipples and ears, hands caressing his erection, cupping his buttocks.

Then, suddenly, they were on the bed, naked together, and he was being rolled onto his stomach, his face pressed against the pillow which shared his secret dreams of this long-forbidden fantasy. Strong legs insistently parted his thighs and, without hesitation, he lifted himself onto his knees, his legs trembling as they supported his weight and Spock's as well. A heaviness pressed against his back, and steel-trap arms closed around his chest, long fingers tightening around his throbbing organ as he felt the Vulcan's maleness probe at the entrance to his body.

He held his breath, then buried his face in the pillow and screamed when the twin-ridged phallus slowly penetrated him. Not a scream of pain, he realized. Not entirely a scream of pleasure. More of a verbal shock ripped from his throat, a sound of surprise.

Surprise that it was perfect, far beyond any dreams of perfection, even more profound than imagined couplings with non-existent gods.

For a few long moments, he simply went with the unexpectedly beautiful sensations, marvelling at the feeling of fullness, the complete lack of any physical or mental discomfort. Pinned as he was beneath Spock's body, it would have been easy to panic, easy to imagine the Vulcan's presence as smothering, easy to convince himself that even perfected love could be as stifling as the darkness in a tunnel.

Now, suddenly, it wasn't true. Spock left a warm, expanding light in the dark places in his mind, and even though they weren't formally melded, Spock's spirit came into him with the same strength and purpose as the Vulcan's penetrating maleness.

"Damn," he whispered. "Damn, Spock... I... didn't... know it could... be like... this." His body stiffened, his organ threatening to implode with each stroke of the Vulcan's skilled touch.

Spock's only response was to settle gently against Kirk's back, the long arms constricting in an embrace which bespoke reassurance. Then, very slowly and deliberately, he withdrew his organ until only the tip remained imbedded in Kirk's flesh, and began to thrust.

With each soul-deep penetration, Kirk gasped aloud, feeling himself opened and probed, experiencing a feeling of flying despite the fact that he was tightly pinned beneath Spock's respectable weight. The Vulcan's organ was warm and alive within him, burrowing deeper with each thrust and creating a plethora of new sensations within its human host.

Kirk simply went with it, unable to do otherwise. He had given his trust, and with it, his love. And though his muscles were aching and sore from the incident in the tunnel, the pain he felt now was a welcomed friend. The death of the past. The birth of their future.

His mind spun in on itself and more than once he felt consciousness threaten to leave him. With an effort which required full concentration, he hung on, his body building toward climax as Spock's love filled him, covered him, closed in on him like the walls of a safe, warm tunnel.

It was then, with that realization, that his organ stiffened, spasming as it flooded his relief into the Vulcan's hand. A cry was torn from his lips -- wordless and spine-chilling, like the wail of some ancient man shouting his triumph over the earth to the night stars.

And deep within himself, far deeper than the recesses of mere flesh, he felt Spock's triumph as well -- a smoldering fire which abruptly burst into flames, filling the darkness with light, incinerating old fears, depositing the seed of love into the fertile ground of possibilities.

The Vulcan's weight settled against him, making breathing difficult, yet far more exciting than ever before. The male flesh still buried inside him softened just a little, and Kirk felt a trickle of that beloved fire escape, caressing his balls as Spock's hand caressed his spent organ.

He felt no desire to move or to speak. Instead, he wanted to lie that way forever -- with the Vulcan's body shielding him, protecting him, crushing him into the softness of a safe, familiar bed. He smiled to himself.

"Yes," he said, very softly.

He felt Spock's head lift, felt eyes on the back of his neck, actually felt a Vulcan brow lifting quizzically. "'Yes'?"

The smile lingered on Kirk's lips as a feeling of pleasant sleepiness crept over him. "Yes," he repeated in a whisper. "I can... love you, Spock. I do love you."

The weight settled against him once more. "Even if my love at times becomes... demanding?"

Kirk considered that. At the moment, it seemed completely unimportant. "I don't think you could ever... smother me, Spock," he said quietly. "Love is a freedom."

"As well as a commitment," the Vulcan returned realistically.

The word which had once held frightening connotations was now almost a comfort, bringing a faint smile to Kirk's lips. Spock's cheek was resting against his own and, turning his head just a little, he managed to leave a lingering kiss on the thin lips.

"With you," he said, arching back against the welcomed burden, "I'm not afraid anymore, Spock."

A warm, knowing hand caressed his face, fingertips teasing over the meld points. "Not even of tight spaces?" the soul-deep voice wondered. "I cannot help but want you for myself... and no other."

Kirk's eyes closed and, very delicately, he kissed the fingertips which strayed over his face. His body surged again at the thought of sharing a forever with Spock. And even the darkness at the end of life's maze no longer seemed like a threat.

"I'm not afraid," he repeated, offering reassurance as he pressed his hips back against the Vulcan's groin and elicited a sigh of pleasant response. "You are my freedom, Spock...."

"You are... certain?"

Kirk didn't know exactly what would happen next, didn't particularly care. "Yes," he whispered. "I'm certain, Spock."

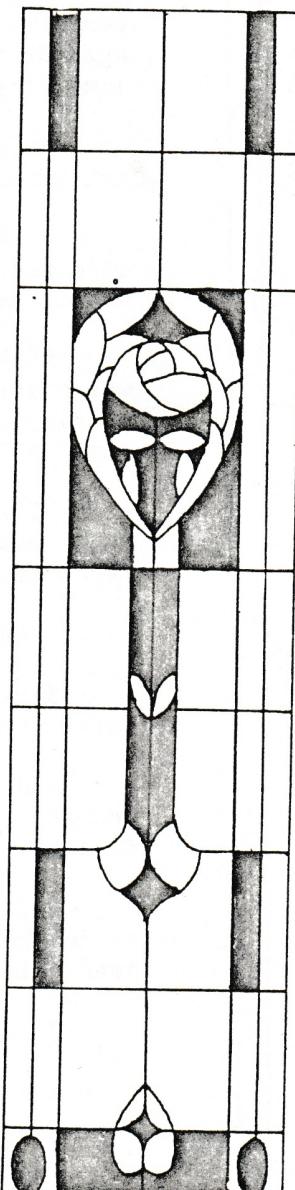
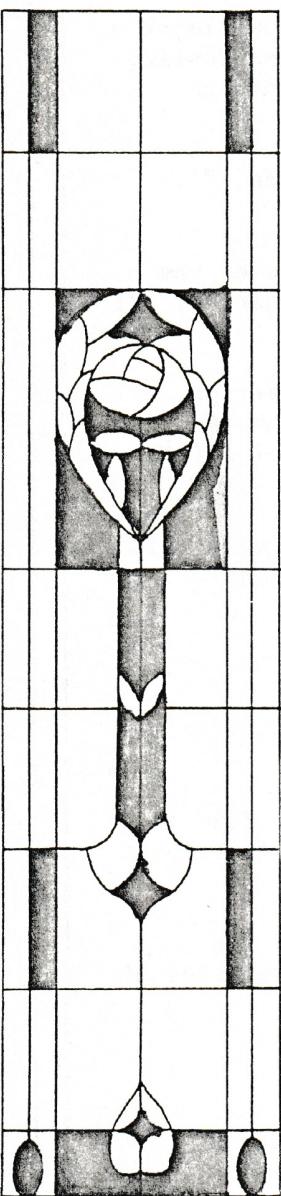
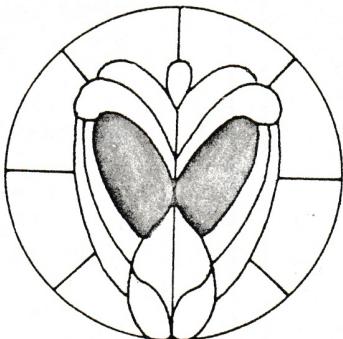
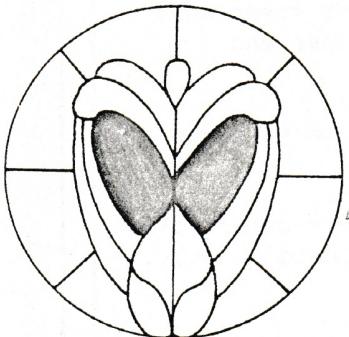
And with that, he felt the Vulcan's hand settle on his face, felt the weight of the past lifted from his shoulders as their minds came together in a blinding flash which bound them together forever.

His heart constricted, his lips parting in a soundless cry. The tunnel held him for only a moment longer, closing around him in memories of sand which passed through his fingers.

He was free.

And there was light at the end of the tunnel.

ON HAVING AND WANTING



"Having is not so pleasing a thing as wanting."

I said those words long months ago.
Even at the time I knew them to be lies.
After years of standing at your side,
I knew there was no pleasure in wanting.

There were long, dark nights of meditation,
Hearing your dream-tossed sleep
As I ruthlessly suppressed my wanting
To present a stoic mask come morning.

There was helpless gut-wrenching terror
When it seemed your luck had run out
Leaving me to mourn in hopeless loss,
Or, worse yet, to unwillingly take your place.

There was burning, mindless jealousy
Each time you turned to some fair lady.
Mirrors and cold logic did not lie.
There was naught in me to catch your heart.

No, there was no pleasure to be had in wanting.
But what of having?
That was something I seemed sure to never know.
I underestimated you.

The memory lives on in me always.
A day I should have died, but did not.
A night you came to me, command image gone,
To offer me more than I had ever dared hope.

Now there are long, bright nights of love
Hearing your peaceful breathing
After expressing all my needs
And knowing you would be there come morning.

Now, the terror has no power over me
For I know should your luck desert you
I and the strength of my love shall not
But will always find a way to shield you.

Now, though your eye may wander
I no longer feel the helpless burning.
I have your word and your thoughts
To assure me I am your only desire.

So it seems I have learned a great deal,
Perhaps against my will.
Having can indeed be a most pleasing thing
If I am having you.

IS THE HONEYMOON OVER?

A. L. Hughes

Spock found Kirk at his desk busily sorting through a pile of work. He didn't stop to acknowledge the Vulcan's presence until Spock deliberately, by accident, knocked a cassette from their bedside table.

"Oh! Hi, Spock."

Oh. Hi, Spock? Nothing more? This lackadaisical attitude his bondmate had taken on was beginning to worry him. In the past two months, he'd had plenty of time to review their relationship because Kirk had become strangely distant. Well, not distant, just.... Spock looked up at the hunched figure typing in his responses to various department requests. I may as well not be here.

He decided not to wait around until the wee hours of the morning when his mate would complete his work.

"I have work to do in the lab." Spock didn't stop to hear Kirk's mumbled response before the cabin door shooshed shut behind him.

He walked the halls of the ENTERPRISE... thinking... before he stopped in front of McCoy's door. Reaching out, he almost touched the admittance bell then slowly, reluctantly, drew his hand back. Just because I can not sleep, doesn't mean McCoy can't.

Head down, he turned away from the door.

"Something wrong, Spock?" McCoy's gentle blue eyes caught the Vulcan's.

"No, Doctor, nothing is wrong."

"Then, why are you at my doorstep at two in the morning?"

Spock glanced away, obviously uncomfortable under McCoy's scrutiny.
Why am I here?

"Won't Jim worry about where you are?"

"I doubt he realizes I am missing." The revealing words slipped out before Spock could stop them. He started to leave but McCoy's hand grabbed his arm.

"Yeah, I've been noticing some problems in paradise. Do you want to talk about it?"

He heard the Vulcan sigh and knew whatever was happening must be terribly frustrating for Spock to come to him.

"Do you want to come in and talk about it?" McCoy repeated.

"Yes."

As McCoy led the way, Spock surveyed his surroundings with a disapproving eye. McCoy's quarters like his mind, were an orderly chaos. The doctor removed a pile of clothes and cassettes from a chair and motioned for Spock to sit down, then shoved aside another pile, making a spot for himself on the couch.

"Would you like something to drink? I'm going to have brandy. It helps me think."

"It is doubtful that the addition of alcohol to your system will assist with your neural processes. In fact, it should have just the opposite effect."

"Did you come here to chastise me for my habits? If so, you can leave; otherwise, answer my question."

Spock thought for a moment, then looked up at McCoy standing expectantly next to his bar.

"I will have half of whatever you are drinking."

McCoy poured a generous half glass and placed it in Spock's hand.

The Vulcan sipped lightly, feeling the liquor take a fiery course down

his throat before exploding in his empty stomach. He fought down the urge to cough.

"What's wrong, Spock?"

Spock hesitated, looking down at the glass in his hand. He knew Kirk had come to McCoy many times in the past, airing his problems and seeking advice. Why couldn't he? Dark eyes looked up to find McCoy studying him.

"Have you noticed anything different in the way Jim has been treating me lately?"

The doctor sipped on his brandy and grinned. "You mean, the way he's taking you for granted more than usual?"

Spock's eyes widened.

"How he seems more distant? Not interested in your comings and goings?"

The unmasked expression of astonishment on Spock's face encouraged McCoy to continue. "He's -- uh-- not as demanding sexually as he used to be."

He knew Spock was beginning to wonder how he could know all this. "You feel neglected, frustrated, and maybe even a little angry because you don't know what is happening or what you can do about it."

Spock clasped his glass tightly. "Do you know what is wrong, Doctor?"

McCoy laughed lightly. "Oh, Spock, it's been a bit long in coming, but I'm afraid the honeymoon is over."

"The honeymoon?" Spock shook his head. He had heard the term before but was uncertain as to his friend's meaning.

"A honeymoon is two things. Just a minute." McCoy got up and refilled his glass. He looked at Spock's nearly empty glass and refilled it without asking.

"One..." McCoy began, resettling on the couch, "it is a short period right after a wedding where the newlyweds go on a vacation before getting down to day to day living." He took a large swallow of his brandy and rubbed the back of his sore neck with his free hand. Taking another sip, he glanced over at Spock.

"Two, it is a much longer period of adjustment when the couple are still on their best behavior."

"I don't understand."

"Think, Spock, think. Normally you're very good at that."

"Doctor, you are being obtuse."

McCoy let his head fall back wearily against the back of the couch. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I must be more tired than I thought. Okay, I'll sum it up.

"You know everything there is to know about each other. You've tried every sexual position possible for a human and a Vulcan. You've become... comfortable with one another."

Spock looked at McCoy quizzically. "But isn't that the desired goal?"

McCoy rubbed his hands over his face and made a mental note to get rid of his beard in the morning. "Ideally, sure. Realistically, it's very boring."

"Jim is bored with me?"

"By Jove, I think he's got it."

Spock sipped on his brandy and leaned back, digesting McCoy's words. He wasn't sure he liked what he heard.

"What do I do?"

"Do you want to know what one marriage and multiple relationships have taught me?"

Spock nodded.

"Ignore him."

Both Vulcan eyebrows disappeared into Spock's hairline.

"I'm serious."

"Ignore him?"

"Exactly. Don't tell him what you're doing or where you're going. And, if he wants sex... have a headache."

"What?"

"Don't give it to him. It may be a few days before he begins to miss you, but you have to keep it up for about ten days."

The Vulcan took in this information along with another swallow of

brandy. He was about to speak, but McCoy beat him to it.

"How do I know this will work? My ex-wife did it to me. I assure you it is very effective. It'll get his attention." McCoy tried to stifle a yawn. "Anyway, if it doesn't work, you'll be no worse off than you are now, right?"

Spock nodded. There was truth in the doctor's bazaar logic and with the way the brandy was working on him, he was having trouble finding fault with it, though he was sure there had to be some fault... somewhere.

McCoy stood up, setting his glass on his cluttered table. "Spock," he said, removing the glass from the Vulcan's fingers, "I'm sorry to have to kick you out, but I have to be back in Sickbay in about four hours. Go back to your quarters, get some sleep and consider my advice. If you want to talk more later, you know where to find me."

They walked to the door together.

"I will consider your suggestion, Doctor," Spock said as he drew his impassive mask into place.

"You do that, Spock. Good night."

The Vulcan stood outside McCoy's quarters for a few moments more, thinking about his friend's sage advice.

"Ignore him," the tall figure muttered as he disappeared around the corner.

*** *** *** *** ***

Ignore him.

McCoy's words rang in Spock's ears as he woke. Reaching out, he found the bed empty. Mentally, he searched for his bondmate and found him, but Kirk didn't let down his barriers. He seemed preoccupied with something happening on the Bridge. Sensing no distress in this preoccupation, he decided to heed McCoy's advice and not hurry to his station. Forty-five minutes later, the Vulcan strode out of the Turbolift. Kirk turned and eyed his first officer. Though Spock was tempted to greet his captain, he held back.

"Spock, I thought you'd be here sooner."

Spock turned, raising one upswept brow. "My shift has just started. I had a small errand to do prior." Curiosity spurred him on. "Was I needed?"



Kirk frowned. He knew he couldn't say much more here because they had decided to keep the nature of their relationship private. "No, Mister Spock. I handled it."

Slowly, Spock turned back to his console. He had to force down his curiosity about what had transpired in his absence. He felt Kirk testing the shield he'd thrown up against his mate's probing. After a short time, Kirk began to take more interest in ship's business than the question of what his mate was hiding and Spock felt the insistent pressure cease.

He sighed inwardly. *This is not going to be easy.*

*** *** *** *** ***

When Spock entered the crew's dining area, he saw Kirk deep in conversation with Sulu and Scotty. He passed by their table on his way to get his lunch. Kirk never looked up. There was no recognition of his presence verbally or mentally.

Spock picked up his tray and, as he turned around, he saw young Lieutenant Sherone wave to him.

"Come, join us, Mister Spock," the always gregarious Kazleen invited. Spock hesitated for a moment, looking toward his mate. Kirk was lost in his discussion with the engineer. He nodded to Sherone.

The Vulcan was surprised at how much he enjoyed the spirited conversation of the group. So much so, he almost lost track of time. Hastily, he got up to dispose of his tray.

"Spock." He found Sherone standing next to him. "If you aren't busy this evening, the four of us will be in the bio-lab testing my theory concerning those worms we found on Simgreen. We'd like to have your input, sir, if you're interested."

Spock glanced at the table Kirk had occupied. Sulu and Scotty were there, but the captain was nowhere in sight.

"I have no particular plans and shall endeavor to be there, Mister Sherone."

Sherone smiled brightly and waved farewell as he flew out the door.

*** *** *** ***

He went directly back to his quarters at shift's end. Kirk was sitting, alone, in the dark. Spock bit his lip to keep from acknowledging his mate.

"What's going on, Spock?"

The Vulcan stopped rifling through a stack of cassettes on his desk. He turned and looked at Kirk as if noticing him for the first time.

"What?"

"Don't give me that confused look. You know what I mean."

"No, Jim. I am truly baffled by what you mean," Spock denied, looking back down at the cassettes in his hands.

"Today on the bridge and later, having lunch with Lieutenant Sherone."

"I do not know what you are ~~interested~~ about the bridge or Lieutenant Sherone. The lieutenant asked me to join him and discuss some theories he has had and...." Spock hesitated deliberately. He knew his mate's weaknesses and decided to use one of them against him.

"And?" Kirk prompted.

"I find him interesting." I do, Spock rationalized. Just not the way Jim thinks. He stood quietly studying the human. When Kirk didn't reply, he clutched his cassettes firmly and started for the door.

"Where are you going?"

Spock turned; something in Kirk's tone irritated him. "I am going to the lab." He cleared the door in two long steps, but even the steel walls couldn't stop the intense anger that buffeted him through their bond.

*** *** *** ***

Spock spent two hours more than he had intended with Sherone and friends. He enjoyed their company and was reluctant to leave. The Vulcan found himself drawn to the enthusiastic Kazleen. He got up to leave.

"Mister Spock," the depth of Sherone's voice rivalled his own. "We will be gathering in my quarters after shift tomorrow. You are welcome to participate in our discussions if you wish."

Spock stopped, considering the invitation. "I am uncertain if I will be able to join you, but if I can, I will."

"Great!" The tall man spun around and waved again as he ran to catch up with his friends.

Kirk was already in bed when Spock came in. The Vulcan undressed quietly, but he sensed his mate was still awake. He climbed into bed beside Kirk, feeling peaceful and relaxed. Lacing his fingers behind his head, he closed his eyes.

Cool fingers crept their way across his chest, seeking out a hard, bronze nipple.

Ignore him. McCoy's words flooded back. If he wants sex, don't give it to him. Have a headache.

Quickly, Spock rolled onto his side, away from Kirk, but this didn't deter his lover. The human's hand snaked its way to his groin, but before he could get hold of the hardening green shaft, Spock slapped the wandering hand and moved away.

The offending hand jumped back. "What's wrong, Spock?"

"I am tired. I do not wish to make love with you tonight."

Kirk grabbed Spock's shoulders and angrily flipped him over onto his back. "You've never refused me, Spock; now explain yourself."

Spock didn't understand the sudden rush of fury that filled him. NO one, especially his mate, had the right to speak to him in such a manner. Spock jerked away from Kirk and rolled from the bed.

"I will not be forced to have sex with you when I do not wish to." He quickly pulled on his pants and shirt. "As to an explanation, I have already explained."

Spock was trying to keep the anger out of his voice. He picked up his boots and headed for the door. "I hope you remember how to sleep alone for that's how it is going to be tonight."

The door swooshed shut behind Spock just in time to stop a glass object from hitting him in the back.

*** *** *** ***

Spock sat bolt upright in bed. The room was bathed in red flashing light and the blaring klaxon made coherent thought almost impossible. The ship shuddered violently. In seconds, the Vulcan streaked for the door, fully dressed.

The captain of the ENTERPRISE and his first officer hit the bridge at the same time. Again, the great vessel shook, but this time it was a small tremor compared to the last.

"Status, Sulu!" Kirk commanded, taking the chair the other man vacated.

"Two small ships, Captain. Privateers. They came out of nowhere," Sulu reported. "They hit us starboard before we could raise our shields. One casualty, moderate damage. They are continuing their attack."

"Why? What have we stumbled on? This is crazy. We have them out gunned 100 to 1; no way they could win. Spock?"

The Vulcan was bent over his console, lost in thought.

Spock? Are you going to answer? he felt Kirk ask thought their bond.

"They are Orions. They are probably attempting to lure us away from some larger target."

Kirk nodded in agreement. "Mister Chekov, scan for a high density electron disturbance field."

The young Russian concentrated on the screen before him.

"There, Keptan! Got it!"

"A cloaking device. We suspected the Orions were doing business with the Romulans and this proves it. Chekov, target the field. I want three photon torpedoes to go right down their throats, on my command."

"Aye, Keptan."

The Orion's smaller ships are increasing their barrage, Jim.

"Sulu, target those Orion pests' main engines. Let's show them what real phaser power is."

"Yes, sir!" The smile on Sulu's face spread from ear to ear as his fingers flew across his board.

"Fire, Mister Sulu."

Four short phaser bursts made their marks. One vessel listed leeward and started to drift. The other had been able to partially deflect one of the phaser blasts and it began to limp away at half impulse speed.

"Ready, Chekov?"

"Ready, sir."

Kirk leaned forward and gripped the arms of the command chair tightly.

"Wait for it. Wait...."

They didn't have to wait long. The distinctive Orion pirate ship rippled into solidity.

"Now, Chekov! Now!"

Chekov's fingers depressed the firing button in front of him as the order left Kirk's lips.

Abruptly, the Orion vessel dissolved into multicolored lights. Debris and radiation stormed the ENTERPRISE's shields causing the ship's stabilizers to overcompensate.

Spock was taken by surprise. Like a piece of paper in a high wind, he was lifted from his seat and tossed violently against the guard rail which encircled the bridge.

With almost clinical observation, he felt his chest hit the rail full force and knew immediately he'd shattered three ribs. Kirk nearly passed out from the sudden, intense pain that streaked through him like an electric current.

Spock!

Call McCoy, came the strained reply before he could turn to see what had happened to his bondmate. Kirk's fist hit the com button.

"Bones, come to the bridge. It's Spock."

He didn't wait for an answer before bounding up the steps to crouch beside the prone Vulcan.

"Spock?" Kirk's cool fingers touched the pale face below him. The controlled, but shallow breathing worried him. Spock's eyes fluttered open.

Can't speak. One lung collapsed. Fractured ribs. I'll be all right.

Kirk shivered, again sensing the pain the Vulcan felt. Spock mentally drew back, trying to protect his human from further discomfort. He looked up to see confusion in Kirk's eyes.

"Jim, move! Let me get to him." McCoy pushed his captain out of the way.

"He's got three fractured ribs and a collapsed lung on the left."

"Do you mind if I make my own diagnosis, Doctor Kirk?" McCoy ran his medi-scanner over the Vulcan.

"Well?"

"Three broken ribs and a collapsed lung," McCoy grumbled. "Let's get him down to Sickbay," he directed his techs. "Anybody else?" he asked, turning to the rest of the bridge crew.

"Here." Sulu was helping Chekov off the deck. The Russian's arm was hanging at an odd angle. McCoy ran his scanner over the arm and grimaced. "Compound fracture."

He injected a quick-acting painkiller. "My ultrasonic is going to get a workout with all these broken bones to mend. Hang on and I'll help you down to Sickbay."

"Bones."

McCoy could read the concern in Kirk's face and answered the unasked question. "He'll be fine, so will Chekov. Just try to make life a bit duller for the next few days so everybody's bumps and bruises can heal up. Now, run your ship. I'll take care of Spock."

McCoy assisted Chekov to the turbolift and disappeared.

*** *** *** ***

Four hours passed before Kirk could visit Sickbay. The ship had sustained moderate damage from the unexpected attack and the explosion of the Orion mother ship. When they were able to board the smaller attack vessel no one was left alive. Orion pirates never allowed themselves to be taken prisoner and this group had been no exception.

Twice Kirk pushed at Spock's mental shields, trying to get at what was happening, but gave up, tired and frustrated.

"Bones!" Kirk called as he entered.

"Shush! There are sick people here. Quiet!" McCoy took Kirk by the arm and escorted him to an isolation room.

Intense heat hit them squarely when the door opened. Spock lay peacefully on the bed. The readings above showed him to be in a light healing trance. Kirk touched the serene face. His fingers assumed their familiar position.

I am all right, T'hy'la. Do not be concerned.

I love you, Spock. Promise me we'll talk about what's happening between us when you're better.

He could feel his mate's exhaustion and knew he would have to withdraw soon.

Yes, beloved, I promise. I must concentrate on healing myself now.

Kirk felt his mate start to withdraw. I love you, he projected as he removed his fingers from Spock's face.

I know, echoed through his mind.

"He's going to be fine, Jim."

"Yes, he will be," Kirk whispered, taking a step back from the bed.
"How are the rest of my crew?"

"Assorted bumps, bruises and broken bones. One casualty. Ensign Sanders. She was in the area of the first strike. A case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, I'm afraid."

Kirk sighed and shook his head. He took the loss of any crewmember hard. "She was young."

"Nineteen. No family."

"No, Bones, she told me one time she did have a family."

McCoy looked up in surprise.

"She said the ENTERPRISE crew was her family. She'll be missed by all of us." Kirk hesitated at the door, looking back at the lone figure on the table. "Call me when he wakes."

"Won't he do that?"

"I don't know. He's been behaving very strangely the last few days."

"Trouble in paradise? Do you want to talk about it?" McCoy had a distinct feeling of déjà vu.

Kirk considered his friend's offer. "When are you off?"

"With luck, 2300."

Kirk nodded. "I'll see you at your quarters for a drink. Maybe you can give me some advice."

Kirk turned and left, missing the broad grin that spread across McCoy's face. He moved to the Vulcan's side and gently laid his hand on the bare arm.

"Spock, I don't know if you can hear me, but in case you can, I just want you to know our little plan is working."

*** *** *** ***

McCoy walked through his door at 2305. A tall glass of deep blue liqueur appeared in his hand. He smiled.

"I see you started without me."

Kirk chuckled and flopped back down on the couch. Pressing his glass to his lips, he took a healthy swig.

"How's Spock?"

"You don't know?"

Kirk stared into his glass. "No."

McCoy sat down and sipped at his drink. "Spock is fine. He's still deep in that healing trance, but everything is going okay. He'll probably wake up sometime tomorrow... maybe."

McCoy groaned as he leaned over and removed his boots. "Boy, that feels good. I've been on my feet all day." He wiggled his toes and ventured on to the subject which had brought Kirk to him. "So, Spock has been acting strangely. How so?"

Kirk got up and began to pace. "He's been... well... distant. he seems to have lost interest in... me."

"Lost interest in you," McCoy echoed, staring at his glass to keep Kirk from seeing the glint in his eyes. "Looked more to me like you had lost interest in him."

Kirk abruptly stopped his pacing and glared at his old friend. "What are you talking about?"

"I've been watching you over the last few months, Jim Kirk, and you have progressively been excluding Spock from your life.

"You, old friend, have been taking him for granted." McCoy raised his glass in a salute. "I give the man credit for having the guts to go on

with his life and not letting your behavior get to him."

Kirk sat down wearily and sipped at his drink. "You really think I've been taking him for granted?"

"Yep. I remember when you two were inseparable. Sexually.... Well, poor Spock used to look tired all the time, but lately, I've noticed how well rested he is."

"I wanted him to talk to me about it, but he wouldn't. He's even...." Kirk glanced away, embarrassed.

"Cut you off?"

"Not surprised, huh?"

"He knows how to get your attention."

Kirk laughed, but suddenly the humor left his eyes. "What am I going to do?"

"First off..." McCoy propped his feet up on the low table in front of him, "get me a refill of this." He held his glass out. "Then we'll discuss how to put the pizzazz back in this weird marriage of yours."

*** *** *** ***

Spock woke to McCoy's smiling face. "Welcome back to the living, Mister Spock."

"Doctor." Spock raised his head slightly and looked around. "Where is Jim?" He felt his heart sink as he realized his bondmate was not nearby.

"He's down on Taylor's Planet. He said he had something important to do." McCoy looked up at the panel above Spock's head. "If you're feeling up to it, I am under orders to escort you to the Transporter. The captain needs you planetside."

The Vulcan sat up, testing the newly healed lung and ribs. "Do you know why I am needed?"

McCoy handed him a fresh uniform before heading for the door. "Mine is not to reason why, Spock, mine is but to stand and deliver... or something like that. Now, hurry up and get dressed. He really does need you down there. Scotty's waiting for you in the Transporter Room."

*** *** *** ***

Spock materialized on a sandy, deserted beach. The sun was just beginning to drop below the horizon; a warm light shone through the encroaching darkness. He started to walk toward a small structure on the sand. The palm leaf roof on the little bungalow rustled, but even sharp Vulcan ears couldn't make out any other sound. His eyes sparkled at the sight which greeted him.

Kirk was stretched out on a soft pallet on the floor; his tanned skin glistened in the flickering light.

"How are you feeling, Spock?"

"I am intact." He paused, looking down at his naked mate. "I was told I was needed."

Kirk smiled a smile calculated to melt his lover's heart. "You are. I talked with McCoy while you were in the healing trance."

"Did he tell you of the advice he gave me?"

Kirk nodded. "It explains a lot." He rose, slipping his arms around the narrow waist, drawing the Vulcan to him.

"McCoy told you to ignore me." The smaller human stretched up and began planting tiny kisses along the hot skin of Spock's throat, enjoying the taste, teasing the sensitive earlobe.

"The doctor advised ten days duration. I still have three point two days of ignoring you to complete his prescription."

A deep, warm chuckle rumbled up from his mate. "I intend..." he slid his hands under the Vulcan's shirt, "to make it..." his hands took an about face and maneuvered their way under Spock's waistband, "very, very hard..." Kirk stretched up to capture the warm lips as his errant hands caught the increasing hardness pressed against him, "to ignore me."

Kirk could feel the small smile Spock always saved for him forming. Gripping his mate's shoulders, Spock pulled back breathlessly.

"I fear I will be unable to complete Doctor McCoy's advice." Spock started to pick his human up in his arms to carry him to bed, but the ache in his ribs made him think better of it.

"The ribs?" Kirk noticed the tiny grimace.

The dark head nodded.

"Then I'll have to be very gentle with you, my love. Gentle and

attentive."

It took only a moment for Kirk's practiced hands to divest his mate of his clothes. Tenderly, he lowered Spock to their bed. He stood studying the long, lean frame as if it were the first time he'd ever seen the Vulcan naked. He dropped to his knees. Cool fingers lightly traced the deep green bruise on his mate's left side.

"I'm sorry."

Spock's eyebrow rose. "It is illogical to be sorry for something you could not have prevented."

Kirk grinned, looking up into Spock's dark eyes. "No, I'm not sorry about your injury... well... I am, but that's not what I mean. I'm sorry about how I've treated you lately."

"I forgive you. I just have to keep reminding myself that you are only human." Spock smiled broadly at the laughter pouring from Kirk.

He suddenly reached up and pulled the smaller man to him. Hot lips pressed soft, cool ones and their tongues began their deep, almost desperate exploration of one another.

Kirk felt his mate's powerful desire overwhelm him. Melting into strong arms, he felt his thoughts of passion entwine comfortably with love. They were no longer two; just the one, the one 'us', existed.

Desert heat seared through the human's body as greedy lips trapped his already hard shaft. In desperation, he grabbed the soft mat under him to try to keep from climaxing. He wanted Spock. In that frozen piece of time he knew he wanted the Vulcan more than life. His mind called out, screaming his desire.

Spock pulled back and stared at his mate with ember eyes. Through the Vulcan, Kirk could see himself as his mate did; passion-flushed and hard, ^{keens} pulled up, his eyes begging his mate for completion. The human closed his eyes, still seeing what the Vulcan saw. The double sensation of being entered and being the enterer wasn't new, but somehow it seemed that way.

Kirk could feel the tension building in his mate. Long, clean strokes pounded into him. The blending of their pent-up passions exploded in a rush of never-ending fire.

Panting, the sweat soaked Vulcan dropped, physically and mentally exhausted, into his mate's arms. His ribs ached, but the tender kisses on his wet hair and cool fingers brushing back his bangs more than made up for the discomfort.

He listened to the even beating of his mate's heart. How could I ever think of ignoring you, T'hy'la?

The gentle patter of rain filtered into his awareness.

"Soothing, isn't it?" Kirk ran his hand down Spock's still damp back.

"Yes."

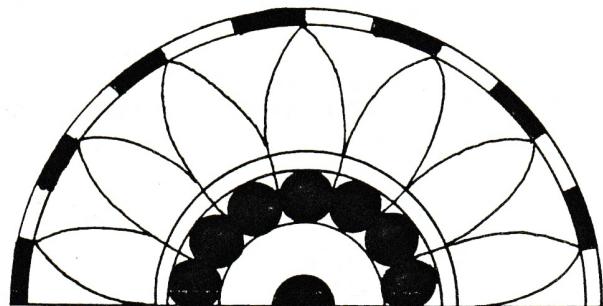
The growl of distant thunder rolled through the bungalow.

"Jim." Spock raised his head and gazed into contented golden eyes.
"I love you."

Kirk gathered his mate closer and whispered so only the Vulcan's sharp ears could hear, "I know."

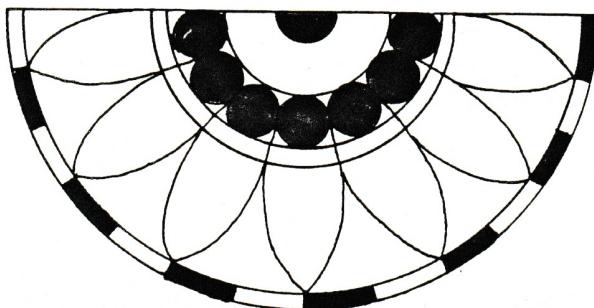
THE SPELL

I'm a magician,
or so you claim,
who has woven a spell
your heart to tame.
It may be so,
but this I know --
the spell, if such a thing there be,
ricocheted and captured me.



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RESURRECTION

My blood is flame,
my being ignited
by the heat
rising in waves
off your body.
Our minds entwine,
reaching for
completion,
reaching for unity,
carrying our bodies
to greater and
greater heights
of want, of need.

I long for this,
live for this.
I cannot live
without it.
It is not only
Vulcans, Spock,
who die for lack
of love -- I was
dead for years
before you came
to me and brought
me back to life
with your touch.

FIRST CONTACT

Captain?

I can come another time.
I do not wish to intrude.

Thank you, Captain.

So I have observed.

Yes.

I wish to understand you.

Perhaps a little.
Not all, but some of what is
important.

Yes.

And I wish to know more.

I do not seek to flatter you.

I am not.

Do you consider me a friend?

Why?

I do not understand human
intuition.

Why?

That is command intuition,
not personal.

May I ask you a question?
You need not answer if you do not
wish to.

You do not expect me to be human;
why?

Oh, you startled me.

You're not intruding.
You're welcome.

I don't have to be the captain here.

Oh. Have you been... watching?

Why?

Do you?

I see.

Is that why you spoke tonight?

I'm flattered.

I know.
Don't be offended.

Good.

Call me Jim.
My friends call me Jim.

I like to, yes.

I'm not sure.
Intuition, I guess.

That's okay, we don't either.
Some people ignore it,
I always follow mine.

It's saved my life, my ship.

Sorry, I can't differentiate the two.

Go ahead. I'll answer.

I am half human.

****Silence****

It is not an attitude
I encounter very often.

Do you play chess... Jim?

Perhaps we could play sometime?
At your convenience.

Because you're not.

I know, and half Vulcan.
That makes you you, unique.

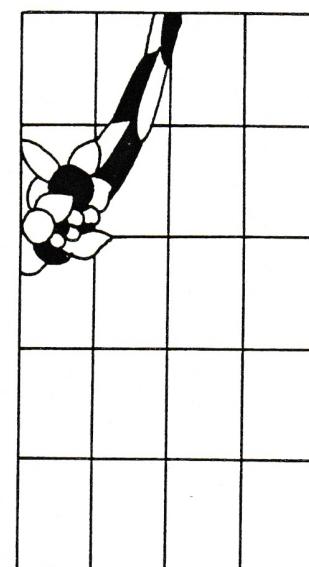
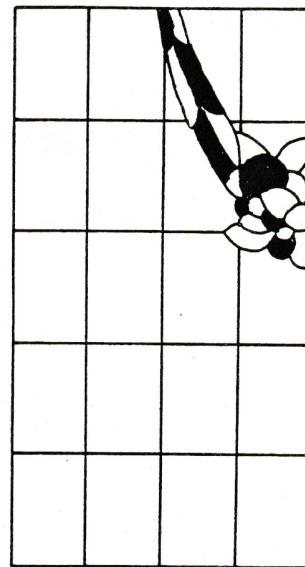
That surprises you. Why?

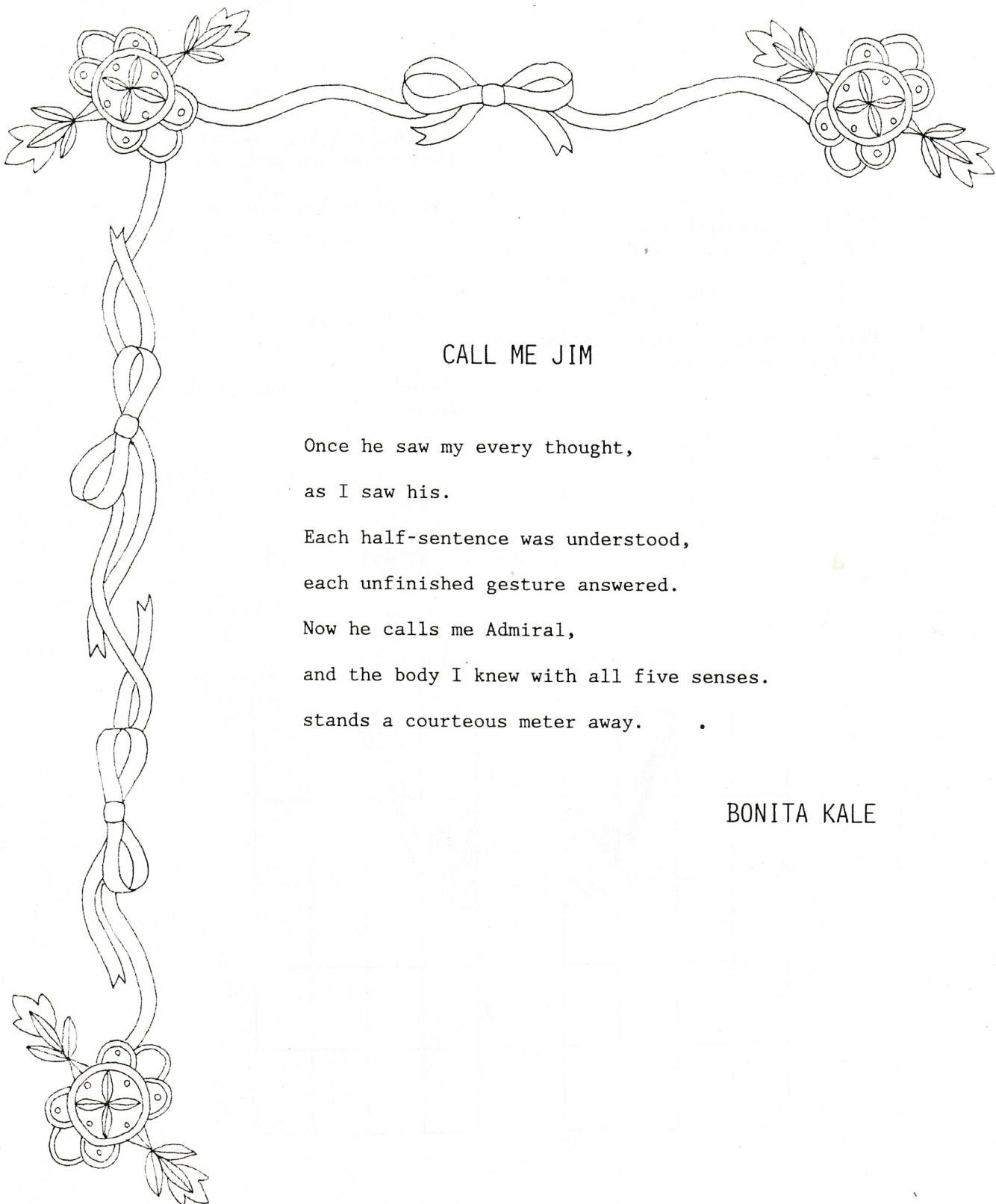
I know.

Yes, yes I do.

Whenever you like, Spock.
Anytime.

D.A. MARTIN





CALL ME JIM

Once he saw my every thought,
as I saw his.

Each half-sentence was understood,
each unfinished gesture answered.

Now he calls me Admiral,
and the body I knew with all five senses.
stands a courteous meter away.

BONITA KALE

BY DAWN'S LIGHT

Addison Reed

Soft grey shadows of an overcast dawn lay across the hollowed, worn edges of the old stairway. Ellen Thatcher Kirk slipped up their familiar steep slope to the second floor of the nineteenth century farmhouse, careful not to wake her visitor.

She'd seen the expensive white aircar outside, beads of moisture from the heavy dew clinging to its sleek sides. Although she'd easily have guessed its occupant anyway -- rural Iowa seldom saw such pretentious transportation -- the small gold insignia across the rear foil left no doubt: Starfleet Command - Official Use Only. A smile played with the corners of her mouth. Jim could still charm just about anything he wanted from anyone he chose; whether his mother or the most powerful military machine in the known universe.

She paused at the window on the small landing, watching shafts of sunlight turning the morning mist into spun-copper veils. It was still hard for her to believe that the powerful man upstairs was her son. Her son was a golden haired young lad, full of boyish tricks and gilded dreams, not this stranger; the courageous, sometimes feared, commander who was recognized and respected in faraway worlds she couldn't even pronounce.

Moving down the narrow hallway, she stopped, seeing bedroom door standing open. Hanging from the top, dislodging some of the chipped blue paint, was a dark blue garment bag -- standard issue, she realized. The top flap hung open revealing the threadbare collar of a worn chambray shirt. Some things didn't change. But fastened neatly on a wooden hanger in front of the luggage was the symbol of all her tow-headed teenager had ever dreamed. Dark maroon trimmed in gold.

Her eyes drifted past the sleeve hanging heavy with braid to the faded wallpaper inside the small room. Admiral. How far he'd come since they'd

hung that paper. He'd just left for a five year mission into the unknown. How afraid she'd been that he wouldn't return -- yet how proud at what he'd become.

The thoughts she'd had of waking and surprising him had somehow lost their appeal and she felt an unaccountable sadness envelop her. So powerful. So capable and important. The man who belonged to this uniform was many things to many people, yet he was so very much alone.

Ellen Kirk harbored no illusions about the demands and responsibilities of a Starfleet career. She knew that the old saying that a captain was married to his ship held a lot of truth. Yet her heart ached to think that her bright, cheerful, full-of-life son had no one to really share his joy with -- or his sorrows. He'd never even brought a woman home with him since he'd left for the Academy. And though the rumors of her famous offspring's reputation with ladies didn't bother her from a moral standpoint, it did disturb her that with such shallow relationships she knew he had found no real contentment. A mother's love was not all her boy needed. When he'd visited her before, she'd seen the lost restlessness, the longing, that seemed to follow him everywhere, never allowing him to really relax or enjoy anything for very long.

Sighing, she moved closer to the door. Her joy at being able to surprise her son by returning home a week earlier than expected had faded into a deep melancholy. Thinking to let him sleep as long as he wanted, she started to turn away when a breeze through the open window fluttered the filmy lace curtains, drawing her wistful gaze into the room.

There, on the old ivory colored iron bed that had been passed down through the years, lay her beautiful golden-haired son, eyes closed peacefully in sleep, pale morning light warming his contented, child-like smile. Nestled snugly against his back, one long, lean-muscled arm draped protectively over the smooth broad chest, was one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen. The raven haired Vulcan stirred slightly as she watched, pulling his companion even closer, burrowing his tousled dark head lovingly against the sturdy neck.

"Mothers," she smiled as she tripped lightly down the stairs, "worry too much."

CONVALESCING

Charlotte Frost

Kirk turned his tired eyes away from his computer console and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He leaned back in his chair and stretched a moment, then turned his attention back to the screen. Before his eyes had a chance to refocus, he heard a faint rustle of cloth from the bedroom.

He moved quietly toward the darkened room. When he reached the doorway, he dialed up the lights to a soft glow. Then he proceeded to the double bed that dominated the room and carefully sat down on the edge of the mattress.

Spock was lying curled up on his left side, his back to the doorway. The blankets were pulled snugly around the one protruding shoulder, but laid loosely across the front of the body, which was clad in light blue Sickbay pajamas.

The Vulcan stirred, a couple of deep breaths accompanying the restless movement. His right arm flopped haphazardly for a moment, then he rolled partially onto his back.

Kirk laid a hand on the Vulcan's shoulder. "Spock?" he whispered.

The other's eyelids fluttered and slowly opened.

"How's my sick Vulcan?" Kirk asked softly.

There was no reply. He reached out to gently take Spock's other shoulder, and he carefully maneuvered the thin frame until his first officer was lying flat on his back.

Kirk patted the nearest arm. Spock's half-closed eyes slowly inspected the room.

The human laid a hand on the chest partially exposed by two open buttons at the top of the pajamas, and leaned his face down close to his friend's. "I know you feel weak, Spock," he whispered gently, "but you're going to be all right."

For the first time, Spock acknowledged his captain's presence. He stared at him a moment, then his eyes narrowed to slits of confusion.

Kirk understood. He laid a comforting hand on a pale cheek and whispered, "Don't be alarmed if you can't feel the bond. It's a symptom of the illness you've had. All of your mental capabilities are impaired right now." He quickly added, "But it's only temporary. It'll all come back when your strength returns."

Spock stared at him a while longer, then looked away tiredly. He seemed to have understood Kirk's words, for his body relaxed and his facial features softened.

Kirk reached beneath the covers and found a warm hand. He clasped it and squeezed gently. With his other hand he brushed back mussed bangs from a damp forehead. "How do you feel?"

The Vulcan's eyes slowly returned to him. They looked so weary that Kirk had to make a conscious effort to keep from frowning.

"Do you feel any pain?" the captain prompted.

It was a long moment before a gravelly voice whispered, "No." Then tired eyelids closed.

Kirk picked up a pitcher that he'd kept beside the bed the two days that Spock had been in their quarters and poured its contents into a glass. He put his free hand behind Spock's head and lifted. "Here's some water," he said.

Keeping his eyes closed, Spock sipped from the glass that was pressed to his lips. He swallowed a few times until even that became too much of an effort.

Kirk lowered Spock's head back to the pillow and returned the glass to the nightstand. He toyed with the thought of calling McCoy, but the doctor was due to stop by in a little while anyway, so he decided against it.

"Spock," Kirk whispered. He waited until the brown eyes partially opened. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

He watched the Vulcan swallow. This time the deep voice was much clearer when it spoke. "I must urinate."

Kirk patted him. "Just hang on a minute and I'll help you."

He opened the lower cabinet of the nightstand. McCoy had left him an armful of modern 'bed pans' specifically for this kind of emergency. In fact, he had insisted that Kirk get samples if Spock needed to relieve himself.

Kirk removed one of the plastic bottles. It had a rubber tube sticking out of the lid. At the other end of the tube was a cylinder shaped piece of plastic open on its other end.

Kirk pulled the covers down to Spock's legs. "Let me turn you on your side," he offered, thankful that Spock didn't seem to be in any immediate distress.

He rolled his bondmate over until the Vulcan faced him. This time he did frown when he felt the thin ribs beneath the pajamas. But he was relieved that Spock seemed to accept his own helplessness.

Using both hands, Kirk unfastened the fly to the pajama bottoms. He reached in and gently took Spock's penis in one hand, drawing it out of the confining garment. With his other hand he brought the cylinder forward. He inserted the Vulcan's organ into the plastic funnel, then laid a comforting hand on the nearest buttock. "Okay. Go ahead."

Knowing McCoy would want a complete report, he watched Spock's face for any sign of pain or distress. The Vulcan's eyes closed, and his facial muscles gradually relaxed. Kirk could also feel the hip beneath his hand slowly relax. Finally, Spock emitted a gentle sigh.

"All done?" Kirk interpreted the faint upward movement of Spock's head as an affirmative gesture. He pulled the cylinder away, pulled the plastic tube out of the bottle, pressed a cap into its place, and tossed the rubber tube and cylinder into the nearest disposal chute. He put the sealed bottle of urine on top of the nightstand.

He gently tucked Spock's phallus away, fastened the fly on the pajamas, and pulled the covers back over him. Pleased with his ability to play nursemaid, he returned his attention to Spock's face, reaching up and caressing a pale cheek. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"The report...," Spock whispered, struggling to keep his eyes open and his voice clear. "Must complete...."

Kirk smiled gently. "It's all taken care of. Don't worry about it." When the Vulcan looked confused, the captain added, "Parkers took care of it. He's a good man. You've trained him well." Spock still looked confused, and Kirk decided against further explanation. He patted a limp hand. "Just rest, Spock."

The door buzzed.

Kirk squeezed the Vulcan's hand. "That's McCoy." Toward the door, he called, "Enter."

McCoy entered the room, followed by Nurse Chapel with a crowded anti-grav cart.

Kirk stood and stepped out of the way. "He's awake," he said as the doctor and nurse moved past him.

McCoy already had his scanner buzzing, and Chapel moved the cart over behind the doctor.

As Kirk watched the two at work, he had to admit his admiration for Christine. She was all the efficient nurse, now. He knew McCoy would never have let her come into their quarters if he feared she would be anything but professional. But she had seemed to have gotten over her infatuation with Spock, and she didn't seem to hold any resentment for the life he and the Vulcan now shared.

"When did he wake up?" McCoy asked without looking up from his patient.

"Just a little while ago," Kirk replied.

Christine was now on the other side of the bed, and McCoy said, "Let's set him up."

It was like moving a rag doll, but the two were so efficient at lifting Spock into a sitting position that Kirk didn't feel a need to interfere. They made sure there were plenty of pillows for support, and the Vulcan sat back against them, his eyes partly open, but his head hanging weakly.

McCoy picked one of many red bottles from the cart. He also picked up a long, wide straw and stuck it into a hole in the top of the bottle. Christine had set a serving tray on the bed, and McCoy set the bottle on it.

He inserted the free end of the straw between Spock's lips. "Drink this," he ordered firmly.

Spock weakly raised a hand to put it around the container in a pathetic attempt to lift it, and began sucking the bottle's contents up through the straw.

McCoy lowered the bottle and the Vulcan's hand to the tray. Like a parent scolding a child, he said, "You don't have to hold onto it, Spock. The straw's long enough."

It was difficult to say if Spock understood. But he did allow the

bottle to rest on the tray, and he continued with his swallowing.

McCoy gave Christine orders for injections, then he turned his attention to Kirk.

The captain gestured to the nightstand. "There's a specimen for you."

McCoy picked up the indicated container and joined Kirk in the doorway between the captain's office and sleeping alcove.

Indicating the specimen, McCoy asked, "Was there any pain?"

"There didn't seem to be."

The doctor sighed with relief. "Looks like we're finally over that part of it."

Kirk watched as Spock's Adam's apple continued to bob in response to his swallowing. "He seems to be hungry."

McCoy cast a glance at his patient. "I'm glad to see it. It's a good sign."

"What's in it?

"It's plomeek soup, with some vitamins mixed in. We made sure all the ingredients were small enough to be sucked up through the straw." He turned his attention back to Kirk. "Has he spoken much?"

Kirk shrugged. "A little. Every word is an effort. He seems... slow, confused. I'm not sure that he even has any idea of how much time has passed."

"I wouldn't be surprised. How did he sleep today?"

Kirk's tone brightened. "Fine. He didn't move a muscle since you left this morning, until just a little while ago."

"Good. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea bringing him in here." McCoy hesitated. "Jim, don't be too optimistic about his recovery time. From all the information Vulcan has sent me, it takes an average of six weeks before the patient is even able to return to duty and, even then, recovery may not be complete. And in Spock's case, with his hybrid genes, we don't know how much shorter or longer the recovery time will be."

Kirk waved a hand. "That doesn't matter. Just as long as he's all right." He couldn't help but remember how scared he'd been....

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

It had been at the end of the watch one dull, routine day when Kirk and Spock had headed for the turbolift after seeing that their replacements had seated themselves. As Kirk sent the lift on its journey to deck five, he looked over at his bondmate and wondered why the other had appeared so withdrawn the past day or so. The bond between them seemed very weak, though Kirk hadn't been able to detect an intentional barrier. He decided against questioning Spock, as he knew the other would talk to him about whatever was troubling him when he was ready.

Suddenly, Spock collapsed to his knees. He wrapped one arm tightly around his stomach and gasped, "I am ill."

Kirk immediately halted the lift and shouted, "Sickbay!"

The lift changed its direction while Kirk put a steady hand on his mate's shoulder. "Easy, Spock." He hit the intercom. "Sickbay, this is the captain. Have a medical team standing by at the turbolift. Mister Spock is seriously ill."

"Acknowledged," came the voice of a technician.

Spock clutched his stomach harder and vomited.

Kirk knelt down beside him, grabbing the Vulcan's shoulders to support him. After the entire contents of Spock's stomach had been retched forth, the first officer finally found respite and sat back on his heels, gasping breath, his head drooping weakly.

Kirk put his arm around the heaving chest and dragged his mate back into the far corner of the lift, trying to keep them both clear of the mess. His mind distantly registered the Vulcan's distress... and lethargy.

"Hang on, Spock," Kirk whispered. He himself felt as though he was in a state of shock. He'd never seen Spock this sick. He hugged his friend tighter, encouraging the other to wipe his mouth against his gold tunic. Spock's eyes were barely open, and his forehead was covered with beads of sweat.

The turbolift came to a stop. The doors opened to reveal an anti-grav stretcher coming toward them, Doctor McCoy leading the way. The faces of the doctor and his two technicians registered shock at finding the lift and its two occupants in such a deplorable condition.

Kirk dragged Spock to the entrance of the lift, so that the stretcher wouldn't have to be brought inside.

"He just up and said he was sick, Bones," Kirk explained rapidly while he helped the technicians lift Spock onto the stretcher. "Then he

threw up." His voice was worried for, even as he spoke, he felt the bond slipping away.

McCoy was leaning over the stretcher as it was moved down the corridor, his scanner buzzing over Spock's form, which had curled up into a fetal ball. The Vulcan was groaning heavily.

Kirk grabbed the doctor's arm, forcing the other to look at him.

"Bones," he whispered intensely, his voice and eyes full of fear as he pointed to his forehead. "I'm losing him."

McCoy didn't reply, just speeded up the movement of the stretcher. When they arrived in Sickbay, the doctor began shouting orders and the Vulcan was soon surrounded by a group of medical technicians and nurses. Kirk knew to stay clear, despite his strong urge to comfort Spock. His mate was at least semi-conscious, as he was continuing to groan painfully but seemed oblivious to the activity around him.

Kirk tried to reach him through the bond -- to reassure him -- but the link was so weak he knew he wasn't getting through.

Spock was undressed and tubes and various machines were plugged into him. X-rays were taken. The board above the bed registered a chaotic mess, and the pain level was extraordinarily high.

He's dying.

Kirk tried to swallow down the think lump in his throat. *If the bond is somehow severed, I won't be able to follow him. Oh, Spock....*

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

Hours later, Kirk was sitting in McCoy's office, his head in his hands, exhausted from trying to reach Spock through the bond. All he'd received for his efforts was an intense headache. Through it all, he'd heard Spock groaning repeatedly in the other room. He had been on the verge of tears for hours, but felt too numb to cry.

Suddenly, the groaning noises became subdued, then almost disappeared altogether. He heard McCoy say, "That'll hold him for awhile."

Footsteps approached the office, and he didn't bother to glance up when they entered the room.

"You better be glad," McCoy's weary voice announced, "that you can't feel what he's feeling. You'd be as incapacitated as he is right now."

Kirk looked up then, thinking that McCoy's eyes looked as tired as his felt. "Is he going to die, Bones?" he whispered.

"I don't know, Jim," the doctor replied sternly as he plopped down into his chair. "I've got three people searching the library banks, but so far they haven't come up with anything that shows the same symptoms." He sighed tiredly and rubbed his hand through his hair. "I just don't know...."

Kirk looked up at the doctor pleadingly. "What's wrong with him?"

"Just about every one of his physiological systems is shot to hell. His temperature is way up, his muscles are spasming, he's got severe diarrhea, he's showing signs of pneumonia, his white cell count is up, his blood pressure is way down...."

"Why did it take you so long to put him out?" Kirk's voice wasn't accusing, just desperately seeking information.

"Because we don't know what we're fighting, Jim. Sedatives are dangerous when you don't know the cause of the ailment. But I had to give him something to give him some relief. He was exhausting himself fighting the pain." The doctor shrugged off-handedly. "I think he was downright delirious toward the end. I don't think he even knew where he was."

Kirk looked up sharply. "Was he calling for me?"

McCoy shook his head emphatically. "He hasn't said a single coherent word. The only noise he's been making are those awful groans." He shook his head sadly. "That boy is really sick."

Kirk swallowed heavily. "If the bond is as weak to him as it is to me, he's probably confused... and scared. We've been married for three years now, Bones, and it's driving me crazy not being able to feel him." He tapped his head. "Imagine, in his state, what that's doing to him."

"Maybe," McCoy relented tiredly. "Then again, I think he's so out of it he wouldn't be able to feel the bond even if it was there."

"Help him, Bones."

McCoy sighed dramatically. "The only suggestion I have at this point is to get in contact with Vulcan directly and see if their doctors know of anything like this. As is, the only thing I can do is treat the symptoms he's experiencing. Unless this thing -- whatever it is -- passes quickly, he's going to get weaker and weaker. There's only so much we can do to slow down the deterioration of his bodily systems."

Kirk nodded and the command tone was back in his voice. "Prepare a message to Vulcan. At this distance it'll probably take a couple of days

for it to get there. I'm going to contact Starfleet Command and see if they'll give us permission to head in that direction."

McCoy nodded. "Good idea." He turned to his computer console to begin his report.

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Kirk did get the permission he needed, as the ENTERPRISE was only on routine patrol, and McCoy's testimony convinced 'Fleet Command that Spock's situation was critical. The doctor sent out a message to the medical section of the Vulcan Science Academy, complete with a report on all of Spock's symptoms. The ship also headed in that direction, her crew hoping that it would be able to intercept the reply sooner than it otherwise would.

Spock's condition gradually worsened in the two days that followed. On the third day it stabilized. McCoy couldn't take the credit, because he still didn't know what he was fighting. He was pumping everything that he thought could possibly help into the Vulcan, and some of it seemed to be paying off. Still, his patient hovered at critical levels in nearly all systems and Kirk haunted Sickbay regularly, the fear never leaving his eyes.

Spock himself remained in a semi-conscious state much of the time. Sedatives had only a short-term effect, and he usually lay curled on his side, moaning his agony. He was so wrapped up in his own misery that he never acknowledged anyone else's presence, including Kirk's.

After one restless night -- despite McCoy's tranquilizers -- Kirk entered Sickbay to check on Spock before reporting to the bridge. It was the fifth morning after the first officer had first become ill. Kirk walked up to the bed in the intensive care unit and rested his hand on the railing that had been attached to the bunk to prevent Spock from falling out of bed during his most intensive fits of pain.

The usual lump formed in his throat at the sight of his mate, who was hooked up to a respirator, and he reached out and tenderly stroked Spock's exposed cheek. The Vulcan was resting on his side, his knees slightly drawn up, his slitted eyes indicating his state of consciousness.

"Spock?" he whispered. He had spoken the much-loved name every morning as, as with this morning, the first officer just continued to lay there, showing no sign of having heard his name.

Swallowing heavily, Kirk moved his hand down the Vulcan's naked body, which was wrapped in a Sickbay sheet. Spock's skin was cool and clammy, as it had been for days, and the complexion of his face was so pale it was almost non-existent.

Kirk closed his eyes when his hands came to the protruding ribs, not wanting to guess how much weight Spock had already lost during this ordeal. He swallowed again.

He didn't look up when he heard familiar footsteps enter the room. He moved his hand back up to Spock's face, then brushed back lengthening bangs from the damp forehead.

Hoarsely, he asked, "Did he sleep at all?"

"The night crew said he drifted off for a few hours last night, woke up for awhile, then drifted off again. He's been awake for a half hour or so this morning." McCoy moved closer to the bed. "I don't want to get your hopes up, Jim, but he is better this morning."

Kirk looked up sharply, hope lighting his eyes despite McCoy's warning, and the doctor explained, "It looks like we've gotten most of the diarrhea cleared up. That'll help a lot in his starting to get his strength back. And," he tilted his head toward the monitor above the bed, "the pain level is down some. Whatever bug it was that was ^Wreaking havoc with his stomach and intestines seems to be leaving him alone -- at least for now."

Kirk gently ran a finger along pale, cracked lips that lay dormant beneath his touch. He shook his head. "I still can't feel the bond," he whispered.

McCoy nodded sympathetically. "If Vulcan doesn't have the answer...." He shrugged. "I don't know, Jim. He's a long way from being out of the woods."

With an effort, Kirk turned away from the bed. "I'll be on the bridge."

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

The reply from Vulcan arrived later that morning. Uhura piped the lengthy message down to McCoy's office, and the doctor promised Kirk he'd let him know as soon as he was able to read it thoroughly.

Kirk sat fidgeting in his chair for nearly an hour. Finally, his intercom beeped.

"Kirk here."

"You better get down here, Jim." There was hesitation on the other end, as though the doctor was considering the cruelty of extending the drama. Finally, he cheerfully announced, "He's going to be all right."

Kirk reached the lift in two giant strides, muttering, "Uhura, you have the conn," over his shoulder. He left the bridge and a room full of relieved smiles.

"In my office," McCoy directed as soon as Kirk entered Sickbay.

The captain obeyed while trying to steady the butterflies of relief that were playing a rapid tattoo inside his stomach.

"First of all," McCoy began as they both seated themselves, "the absence of the bond is a normal symptom for this ailment, the name of which is fifteen syllables long and that I can't pronounce. But, in laymen's terms, I guess you could call it 'The Vulcan Flu'." At Kirk's look of surprise, he asked, "Remember the last planet we were on? Prytar?"

Kirk nodded, waiting.

"Well, as you know, there were some Vulcans on that planet and one of them must have been carrying the bug that infected Spock. From all that I've read here," he indicated the lengthy printout on his desk top, "that's the only way he could have gotten it. The germ lies dormant for a couple of weeks and then it attacks, with a vengeance." He watched Kirk nod. "This flu isn't exactly common on Vulcan, which is why it wasn't in our medical library, but it isn't rare either. There isn't a cure for it, so all you can really do is just treat the symptoms and let the thing pass. Actually, there's been very few deaths from it, and most of those were in babies or people who lived way out in the desert and couldn't get treatment soon enough. But the intense pain is very common for this infection." The doctor actually developed an amused glint in his eye. "In fact, they claim there have been some reports of patients pleading for death because they couldn't handle it."

Kirk wasn't amused, but he felt himself relaxing with the information. They were no longer dealing with an unknown.

"In addition to all the obvious physical symptoms," McCoy went on, "there are some neurological ones as well. Not only can neither you or Spock feel the bond, but all his mental and telepathic capabilities are dormant right now. That's the reason he wasn't able to control the pain. It may also explain his lethargy. He has no 'psychic sense', so to speak. He can feel us touch him, hear us talk about him but, according to Vulcan's report, it's all just a blur to him. His mind is so screwed up right now that he can't sort out the incoming messages."

When McCoy didn't continue, Kirk took a deep breath and released it slowly. "How long before this thing runs its course?"

"I think he's already turned the corner. He's even gotten a bit better this morning after you were in. But we've still got him on the respirator, his lungs are so weak. His white cell count is finally starting

to drop, and, like I said, he's over the diarrhea." The doctor shook his head. "But we're still talking days, Jim, before he'll be able to talk or even sit up. He's incredibly weak. And the Vulcan Science Academy claims it takes an average of six weeks before the patient is completely recovered."

"Six weeks?" Kirk whispered in disbelief.

"That's right. This bug really does them in. You'd better make sure you've got some good people to handle his department for awhile."

Kirk nodded slowly. Sulu had temporarily taken over the first officer position, and Lieutenant Parkers had been running the Science department. They'd both done fine so far.

"Another thing," McCoy went on. "Vulcan has developed a drug that has helped fight the combination of symptoms and allows the patient to get more rest than he otherwise would. They're shipping some to us via express courier." He handed Kirk a writing slate. "Here's the coordinates where we can rendezvous with the courier." The doctor shook his head while Kirk accepted the information. "I sure wish we'd known about the drug earlier. It sounds like it would have saved Spock a lot of misery."

Kirk nodded absently, not wanting to think about what Spock had been going through the past week. He turned the doctor's communications console toward himself. "Kirk to Chekov."

"Chekov here, sir."

"Mister Chekov, lock in a course for the following coordinates...."

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Some ten hours later, the drug had been transported aboard the ENTERPRISE. McCoy followed Vulcan's instructions and administered the recommended dose to Spock, understanding that the first officers' hybrid physiology could respond better or worse than anticipated.

Twenty minutes after being administered the drug, Spock dropped off into a deep, deep sleep.

"Thank ghod," McCoy muttered, studying the overhead monitors. "If we can keep him out like this for most of the next few days, he can start gaining some strength."

The railings had been removed from the bed, and Spock was now dressed in blue Sickbay pajamas. Kirk reached down to stroke the first officer's hair. *Please, finally....*

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

Two days later, Kirk was again next to the bed, watching the steady rise and fall of his mate's chest.

"I still can't feel anything, Bones," he said without looking up.

"According to the report, the neurological areas are the last ones to recover. I wouldn't worry about it, Jim." Kirk nodded, and McCoy sighed and said, "But we've got another complication."

The captain looked at him sharply. "What?" he demanded.

"He's developed kidney stones. At first, I thought it was some sort of side affect from the drug, but the report didn't mention it." He shrugged. "It could be from a number of things. Some people are just more prone to those than others, and Spock's had them a couple of times before."

Kirk nodded. "But you were able to give him something that got rid of them quickly."

McCoy also nodded. "Yes, and I've given him some more of the same drug I used before, but in a small quantity. I don't know how it'll interact with the Vulcan drug we're using on him, so I'm being cautious until I'm sure they'll mesh okay."

McCoy shook his head grimly. "The night crew called me in at three o'clock this morning because he was trying to pass those stones." He sighed wearily. "It started those awful moans all over again. Thank god we've got him resting now."

Kirk stopped himself from asking, "Why didn't you call me?" But he knew there wouldn't have been anything he could have done. Seeing his friend in further pain would have only increased his own misery. Quietly, he asked, "He hasn't spoken at all, has he?"

"No. When he's conscious he's still 'out of it'. I think that's a result of the drug as much as his weakness."

Kirk was silent for awhile as he studied his sleeping mate. When he spoke, his voice was firm. "As soon as he's strong enough, I want him in our cabin, Bones."

McCoy looked at him sharply. "Your cabin?"

The captain nodded. "Yes. I'm way behind on my paperwork, so I'd have plenty of excuse to stay holed up in our quarters." He turned to the doctor and his voice was pleading. "It's got to help him, Bones, being

back in a familiar place. He's been in this blasted Sickbay for over a week now. I want him in our bed. I think he'll rest better there, especially after he's coherent."

McCoy studied the other for a moment, then nodded. "I'll consider it, Jim."

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

Now, in his cabin, Kirk watched with affection as slurping noises indicated that Spock had reached the bottom of the bottle of soup. Both he and the doctor went to the Vulcan as Christine removed the empty container from the tray.

Kirk leaned over his mate, touching a pale cheek in the process. "Spock," he whispered, "would you like some more?"

For a moment there was no response. Then Spock shook his drooping head once.

Kirk took the frail shoulders in his hands and gently maneuvered Spock back against the pillows so the first officer's head could drop back against them.

McCoy ran his scanner over the Vulcan's mid-section. "Good," he approved a moment later. "His stomach is behaving." He looked at Kirk. "If he throws up or shows any signs of discomfort, call me immediately."

"Of course."

"Looks like he's going to fall right back to sleep," McCoy observed as he put his scanner away. "That's good, too. He needs all the food he can handle, and all the rest he can possibly get." The doctor looked at Kirk. "I'll be back in a few hours, Jim. But, like I said, if he wakes up before then, go ahead and encourage him to drink some more soup. It's the only way he's going to gain back his strength."

"Right, Bones. I'll put the bottles in the heating cabinet."

McCoy nodded and motioned to Christine. "All right, we'll leave you two alone for now." He turned back to his patient. "But, here, let's get him back down under the covers."

Kirk and McCoy maneuvered Spock from a sitting position down into a prone position beneath the blankets. The Vulcan's eyes were closed, but shallow breathing indicated he wasn't quite asleep yet.

"See you later, Jim."

McCoy and Christine left the cabin and Kirk turned to the heating cabinet in his office and put the soup bottles in it. Then he moved back to the sleeping area and sat on the edge of the bed, watching Spock. The Vulcan was turned slightly on his side, facing toward Kirk, looking a little more peaceful, but still pale.

The human bent down and gently brushed his lips against a cooling forehead. "I love you," he whispered.

Eyelids fluttered but refused to open.

Kirk slipped his boots off, laid down on the bed, and quietly scooted forward until he was lying along side his mate and pressed against him. He brought Spock's head against his chest, holding it carefully and stroked the silky strands of hair.

After a moment, he kissed the top and whispered again, "I love you."

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

The man standing before his desk was dark-haired, dark-eyed, about six feet tall, and had a muscular build. Kirk barely knew him, as he'd had little reason to speak to him during the eight months the lieutenant had been on board, but he knew that Spock liked him. And that was good enough for him.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Parkers. Please have a seat."

Parkers sat down, perhaps a little more stiffly than Kirk would have liked, but he could understand any crewman's nervousness at being summoned before the captain.

Kirk began his explanation. "As you know, Mister Spock is ill. While Doctor McCoy has assured me that he will recover completely, he estimates that it'll be six weeks before he is able to return to full duty." He watched Parkers eyes widen. "Therefore, I need someone I can count on to run the Science department until Mister Spock returns to duty, particularly since we have this quasar phenomenon to study when we reach our assigned quadrant. Mister Spock has spoken highly of you, and since I have no complaints about how you've run the department in his absence thus far, I will expect you to continue to keep up the good work. Let me know if there is anything you need to assist you."

Parkers nodded. "I appreciate your confidence in me, sir. I have done as much background study as possible to prepare for our rendezvous with

the quasar. I believe my people are prepared to record everything concerning it."

"Good. I'm pleased to hear that."

Parkers took on a hesitant expression. He glanced toward the cabin's sleeping area, which was blocked from view by the door Kirk and Spock had had installed after their bonding. A moment later he returned his attention to his captain. "Sir," he spoke, his voice hesitant, "Mister Spock is the finest officer I've ever had the privilege of working under. I hope you'll pass along my best wishes for his recovery."

Kirk smiled. He liked the man. "I'll do that as soon as he's coherent enough. He's still a bit fuzzy right now, but I'm sure he'll appreciate your concern."

"Thank you, sir."

"That's all, Parkers. Dismissed."

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

"Jim?"

Kirk felt his heart flutter. It felt incredibly good to hear that word spoken from those lips. He entered the sleeping area with a soup bottle in his hand.

Spock was sitting up, his eyes almost completely open, and showing a spark of life. He'd just finished off a bottle of soup and now, for the first time since becoming ill, seemed to be in the mood for some conversation.

"What?" Kirk asked softly as he seated himself beside his mate.

Spock looked suspiciously at the bottle in Kirk's hand. "What is that?"

"More soup."

"I just consumed some."

"I know," Kirk smiled warmly. "But it would make me and Doctor McCoy much happier if you'd have another one. You were able to handle seconds this morning."

Spock made no reply, so Kirk removed the cap from the bottle and stuck a straw into it. "Here," he held it out, "see if you can drink some

more. It's good for you."

The dark eyes studied the container. "Jim, why am I drinking soup from a bottle?"

Kirk didn't allow his smile to fade with his thoughts. Spock had consumed a total of seven bottles of soup in the last thirty-six hours, but this was the first time the first officer had noticed the form it came in. Spock had been that way in many things: slow to comprehend, slow to interpret other's words, slow to formulate his own thoughts. McCoy kept assuring Kirk that it was all a result of the intensity of the flu, and that it would pass as the Vulcan gained strength.

"Because you're too weak to handle a bowl and spoon," Kirk replied easily. "Here, just set the bottle in your lap and suck up the soup through the straw."

Spock did as he was told, and drank down this bottle faster than he had any of the others. Sighing heavily after he'd finished, he watched Kirk put the empty bottle on the nightstand and said, "I am tired of the taste."

"Okay, I'll see if Bones can put more variety on your diet card. I guess even Vulcans get tired of plomeek soup every once in a while."

"Indeed. And that is not true plomeek soup. It is synthetic. It has vitamins and other additives that effect the taste."

Kirk didn't respond, but sat back on his heels on the bed and noted that Spock's eyes had drooped some. The first officer's awareness wasn't going to last much longer.

"Jim," Spock said with concern, "I have not yet completed my report on Pryntar. I must finish it."

Kirk took Spock's hands in his. "Spock," he said softly, "that's all been taken care of. You've been sick for a long time. Parkers finished your report for you."

"Parkers?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Parkers. Don't you remember?" Kirk prompted gently. "He's one of the top people in your department. He's taking your place until you get back on your feet."

Spock's face became very contemplative, but the first officer didn't reply.

Kirk ran his fingers across the bangs that were in a state of disarray. "You've got nothing to worry about, except getting better. And that means

eating and sleeping." After a long moment of silence, he asked, "How do you feel in general?"

Spock looked at him through partially-closed eyes. "As you have noted, extremely weak. But I am not experiencing any pain." His eyes narrowed as he studied his captain. "The bond is not there."

The words had been spoken levelly, but Kirk knew how much they affected Spock. This was the third or fourth time that the Vulcan had made some mention of it. He tried to keep his own voice reassuring. "I know. It's not there for me, either. But all the background data on this flu you had indicates that the fading of the bond is normal for this type of thing. It'll return, Spock. It just takes time."

In a rare moment of vulnerability, Spock whispered, "It is difficult to be at peace without it."

Kirk sighed with frustration. "I know. But other Vulcans have been able to wait it out, and we will, too." The human leaned down and kissed the other's forehead. "Just get better, Spock."

Spock made a pathetic attempt at nodding, as he had started to drift off. Kirk lowered him back down to the mattress and carefully covered him up. Then he waved down the light and left the room.

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

The study of the quasar was going well, if not somewhat slowly for all the non-scientists on board. Kirk had his paperwork all caught up, and he now spent a lot of time in the gym, working off his restlessness and taking advantage of Spock's slowly gaining strength to leave the confining walls of his cabin. The Vulcan was looking better daily, though McCoy still felt it necessary to check in on him every few hours. He was allowing his patient to eat solid foods, but Spock could only leave bed long enough to use the john -- and he always needed assistance in that, as he still didn't have the strength to stand on his own.

One evening, after returning from the gym and checking to see that Spock was sleeping peacefully, Kirk sat down at his desk and began reviewing the reports on the quasar. He'd barely settled into his chair when he heard the buzzer at his cabin door.

"Come."

Lieutenant Uhura entered with a wrapped package in her hand. "I hope I'm not intruding, sir," she said pleasantly.

"No, not at all," Kirk smiled back. "Please, have a seat."

She sat down in the offered chair and set the package down on the desk top between them. "I won't be long. I just brought Mister Spock a sort of 'get well' gift." She looked a little embarrassed. "I suppose he'll think gifts are illogical, but...."

Kirk winked conspiratorially at her. "Just between you and me," he whispered, "Spock is a little boy at heart when it comes to receiving gifts."

Uhura relaxed then and grinned back at him. "His secret is safe with me."

Kirk studied the package. "Do I get to know what it is?"

"No, no," she scolded. "You'll just have to be surprised right along with him." Her tone turned serious. "How is he doing, Captain? I know everyone in Sickbay keeps saying he's getting better, but it's been so long since any of us have actually seen him...."

Kirk felt a warmth spread over him at her concern. "He's getting stronger, but it is a frustratingly long process. He's talking a lot now, but his thought processes are slow." Kirk brightened. "McCoy said he thought he might let him get out of bed tomorrow and try walking around a little bit."

Uhura regarded him with sympathy. "You must have been very worried."

"Oh, I was," Kirk said emphatically, not feeling any need to hide his feelings from this caring woman. "Those first few days were the worst." His expression became distant. "I hope I don't ever see him go through anything like that again. It was terrible."

His visitor smiled warmly at him. "At the risk of getting too personal, I'd like to say that all of us on the bridge think it's really wonderful that you and Spock had the courage to commit yourselves to each other."

"Thank you, Penda. I've never sensed any disapproval from anyone, and Spock and I both appreciate it."

Uhura looked at the deck a moment, a private smile on her face. Then, as though coming to a decision, she looked back at the captain and said, "You know, some years ago, I used to have quite a crush on you."

Kirk grinned a little sheepishly. "I think it's pretty safe to say that my feelings were the same."

Uhura's smile widened. "Christine and I used to get together over coffee and talk about our fantasies of you and Spock, and we tried to give each other hope and encouragement. I guess I eventually grew out of it,

and I was genuinely happy for ^{You} and Spock when you announced your bonding." Her smile faded. "I think it was more difficult for Christine, but she seems to have gotten over it."

Kirk nodded lightly. "I have nothing but the utmost respect for her professionalism. And she's been very cordial on a more personal level."

"I guess, between the two of you, you destroyed just about every fantasy on the ship when you announced your bonding," she said, grinning widely.

Kirk glanced away, heat coloring his cheeks. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

She shrugged and giggled slightly. Then she said, "Anyway, I thought that after all this time, I really should make it clear that I think the love you and Spock have for each other is a beautiful thing. And, while I can't speak for the entire crew, I know that every person on the bridge feels the same way."

Kirk was about to make a reply, but his door buzzer interrupted him. He punched an intercom button. "Who is it?"

"Lieutenant Parkers, sir."

Kirk activated a switch that opened the door.

Uhura rose to her feet. "I'll be going, Captain."

Kirk gave her a warm smile. "Thank you very much for the gift. I'll give it to Spock the next time he's awake."

Uhura turned and gave Parkers a curt nod as she passed him through the doorway. The man looked at her curiously, then back at Kirk.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

Parkers held out a handful of colored discs. "We've completed our study of the quasar, sir. Here are copies of our entire report."

Kirk accepted the discs. "Thank you, Lieutenant." He smiled at the man who stood before his desk. "Once we complete our two survey missions in this sector, we'll be heading for Starbase 29 for a week's leave. I'd say your people deserve it."

"Thank you, sir."

"Dismissed."

Parkers turned to leave, but paused when a distinct 'thump' came from

behind the bedroom door.

He and Kirk glanced at each other, then the captain rushed through the entrance to the sleeping alcove as the door slid back to admit him. He found Spock leaning over one side of the bed -- almost to the floor -- trying to retrieve a pitcher of water that he had obviously knocked over.

"Here, Spock, I'll get it," Kirk said softly. He grabbed his mate by the shoulders and hoisted the Vulcan back into the bed. When he saw Spock's brows dart up in surprise while looking past him, he turned to find Parkers standing in the doorway, watching them.

"I'll take care of him," Kirk said pointedly.

Parkers hesitated, blushed, then nodded and abruptly left the cabin.

Once he made sure Spock was sitting up and resting comfortably against some pillows, Kirk bent down and began to clean up the mess.

"I seem to be rather uncoordinated," Spock said hoarsely.

"It's all right, Spock," Kirk soothed automatically. He wiped up the floor with a towel, then turned toward the small food processor near the dresser. "I didn't realize you'd wake up so soon," he said as he dialed up another pitcher of water. "Otherwise, I would have been here."

"What was Lieutenant Parkers doing here?"

Kirk looked sharply at Spock, as the first officer's tone reflected disapproval. He brought the pitcher over to the nightstand. "He was giving me his report on the quasar we've been studying. He was just about to leave when we heard you in here." He poured Spock a glass of water and looked at him curiously. "Does it embarrass you that he saw you?"

Spock brought the glass to his lips with a hand that trembled with weakness. Kirk wrapped his hand around Spock's and helped the Vulcan drink. "Had enough?" he asked when the glass was three-quarters gone.

Spock nodded. "That is sufficient for now. Thank you."

Kirk set the glass back on the nightstand. Then he turned his attention back to his mate, pushing the long bangs out of the dark eyes. "You're due for a haircut."

"Yes, I know."

"Spock, I think Parkers was just concerned about you. He was standing there to see if you needed his help."

The Vulcan looked away. "I do not need his kind of help," he said



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quietly.

"What do you mean?" Kirk asked with concern as he caressed Spock's brow with a couple of fingers. "I thought you liked him."

"^{He} is a bright, young man," Spock replied. "And extremely capable."

"But?" Kirk prompted.

The first officer sighed. "I wish he was not so... fond of me. He has, as you humans would say, a 'crush' on me."

"Are you sure?" Kirk asked in disbelief. "Maybe you've just misinterpreted --"

"I am sure," Spock cut in firmly. "It has been going on for quite some time."

Kirk moved his hand from brow to crown, slowly running it back through Spock's thick hair. "How come you didn't tell me?"

"I saw no reason to. I also thought you would probably wish to speak with him about it, and I did not want you to. He cannot help how he feels."

"You seem to have some pretty strong feelings about how he feels," Kirk pointed out.

Spock took another deep breath, then he looked directly at his captain. "He has been a source of irritation at times. He rather blatantly asked about my bond with you. I believe he was specifically looking for 'clues', so to speak, that I was not happy in our marriage."

"How long has this been going on, Spock?"

The Vulcan grew thoughtful a moment, then shook his head in defeat. "I cannot answer accurately. My time sense is not operating properly. It is difficult to place events in perspective."

Kirk patted him on the head. "S'okay. That's not really important, anyway. But I assume you've given him some sort of reprimand for his actions?"

"Yes, I believe I have made it clear that my personal life is not open for discussion. He has refrained from asking me further questions, but it is obvious that his feelings are still quite strong."

Spock's tone was troubled, and Kirk said, "Well, you can't be responsible for how other people feel about you."

"Yes, I know."

The human shrugged. "I imagine he'll grow out of it at some point. If not, maybe he'll ask for a transfer to another department, if not another ship. Or maybe we'll have to arrange it so you two aren't working together."

"That can sometimes be difficult."

"I know." Kirk smiled with encouragement, still playing with Spock's hair. "Let's see how things go when you get back on duty. If the situation still needs to be dealt with, then we'll have to confront him." Then, relieved to change the subject, he said, "Speaking of crushes, Uhura brought by a gift for you."

"A gift?" Spock asked in puzzlement and with obvious interest. "Why would she bring me a gift, and what has that to do with 'crushes'?"

Kirk chuckled and gave his mate a quick peck on the lips, then moved into his office area, pushing a button to keep the bedroom door from sliding shut. "She was telling me how she used to have a crush on me," he called over his shoulder. "But she came by today to tell me how she was truly happy for us both."

"A nice gesture."

"Yes." Kirk picked up the gift and brought it back into the bedroom. "She left this for you as a 'get well' present." He set the package on Spock's lap.

The Vulcan looked down at it. "It is quite heavy," he remarked with appreciation.

"Uh-hmm. Open it."

The package was simply wrapped, and even in his weakened condition Spock had little trouble opening it. After the paper had been pulled away he found himself looking at a little statue of a brown-skinned native dressed in an elaborate African costume. Beside the native was a little card. It was folded in half, and the front of it said, "To Spock". The Vulcan opened it, held it before his eyes, squinted, then looked at Kirk. "Jim, I am having trouble focusing. Please read it."

"Certainly." Kirk took the card. "'Spock, here is a token for your health. It's been in my family for centuries, and is a statue of the Swahilian god of medicine who is supposed to guard over the well-being of the members of the household. I own a variety of them and felt I could part with one. I hope it protects you and Captain Kirk well. Best wishes for a speedy recovery, Uhura.'" Kirk put the card down and picked up the statue. "That's very nice of her."

Swahili
made
a language, not
a tribe

"Indeed. She is a thoughtful individual."

"This thing must be worth a fortune," Kirk said as he studied it. He held it out to Spock. "Want to see?"

"I fear I will drop it."

"Okay, I'll put it here on the headboard." Kirk did so, placing the statue on a shelf where Spock was unlikely to knock it off.

Spock suddenly looked down, furrowing his brows in concentration. "Jim," he whispered intensely, "I feel something."

Kirk understood immediately and put a hand to his forehead. "Yes," he agreed enthusiastically. "I feel something, too. But it's real fuzzy... far away."

Spock nodded.

Kirk looked at the Vulcan. "It's coming back, Spock, just like McCoy said it would."

"That is good to know." Spock said the words levelly, but they spoke volumes for them both. Though Kirk had no reason to doubt McCoy or the report from Vulcan, he still had the fear in the back of his mind that their bond would never return.

Kirk smiled warmly at his mate. "You can get out of bed tomorrow. You must be desperate to get out of this room."

"Yes, it has been quite tiring not being able to do more than sit up."

"I'll take you for walks around the ship as you get stronger," the human promised. "And we've got leave coming up in a few weeks. Maybe you'll be able to go planetside by then."

"That would be most fortunate."

Spock's eyelids were starting to droop, and Kirk ran a finger down from the center of the forehead to the tip of the prominent nose. "I love you." The words didn't seem to be enough, so he acted on his desire to rise to his knees and wrap his arms around his lifemate. He squeezed affectionately and buried his face in the other's neck.

"I was so scared, Spock," he found himself whispering. "I felt the bond slipping away and I thought you were going to die, and that I was going to be left behind. I couldn't stand it if that happened."

Spock was too weak to return the embrace, but his hands rested lightly on either side of Kirk's waist. "I regret the trauma I have caused you,"

he whispered back hoarsely. "I believe my illness has been much more difficult for you than for me."

Kirk was about to deny that statement -- thinking of all the pain Spock had endured -- but decided against starting a meaningless argument. He simply kissed the Vulcan on the cheek and said, "I've got to check in on the bridge. Then I'll be back and I'll join you in bed."

As he pulled back, he found the Vulcan looking at him hopefully.

"Jim?"

"What?"

"When you return, can we not remove the pajamas I am wearing? I miss feeling the coolness of your skin against mine."

Kirk smiled warmly. "Sure. I guess McCoy won't mind."

"Indeed. This garment is becoming cumbersome and annoying."

"Why don't we just remove them now?" Kirk said as he reached toward the zipper at the collar.

Spock was able to be a little bit helpful, and they had the garment off with little fuss. Kirk then helped the Vulcan scoot back beneath the covers.

"I won't be long. Try to get some sleep."

"I do not believe that will be difficult," Spock replied as he curled on his side, presenting a slight smile that expressed his new freedom from having the confining clothing removed. Like Kirk, he was accustomed to sleeping in the nude.

Kirk kissed him on the forehead and left for the bridge.

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

Four days later, Spock was in a robe and slippers with his arm around his captain's shoulders, the captain's arm around his waist, walking slowly through the ship's botanical gardens. It was past 2200 hours and they did not anticipate running into any other crewmembers.

The human tightened his arm around his mate's waist affectionately. "You may be back at duty sooner than the six weeks McCoy's been anticipating."

"That may be true," the other agreed. "I have gained much strength in the past few days."

Kirk nodded. The hint of the bond in the back of his mind was slowly growing stronger. He also thought it had done Spock a world of good to finally get out of bed. The Vulcan was still weak -- he could not take more than a few steps at a time without support -- but his mind was much clearer, a spark was in his eye, and McCoy's carefully calculated diets had finally put some flesh back on the prominent bones.

"Let's sit down," he suggested when they came to a small wooden bench.

Spock readily complied. He was the last person who would ever complain about all the careful attention he'd received during his illness. He wanted to get back to full health as quickly as possible, and if that meant following McCoy's orders to the letter and accepting a good deal of pampering from his mate, then he wouldn't object to complying.

Kirk brushed his hand across the forehead that was covered by neglected bangs. "Just as I thought," he noted quietly, "you're sweating a little."

"I do feel I have exerted myself to a minute degree," Spock admitted. "But I am thankful that you have taken the time to bring me here. It has been quite some time since I have visited this particular garden."

Kirk glanced about them and pulled his mate closer so that the Vulcan's head was resting on his shoulder. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Indeed."

They both tensed when they heard the door to the garden slide open. The little path they had walked had various turns, so they were not in a position to see the entrance to the garden. But they both knew someone had entered.

Spock reluctantly removed his head from Kirk's shoulder.

The human maintained a degree of contact by scratching at the back of the neck where the hairline ended. "There's nothing to worry about, Spock," he whispered soothingly, knowing how much it bothered Spock to be seen at less than his best. "No one expects you to look like the efficient first officer after all these weeks that you've been sick."

The Vulcan nodded but did not lay his head back on Kirk's shoulder. He didn't object, however, when the human's hand moved down to his robed back and rubbed in large, affectionate circles.

There was the sound of heeled boots, and a moment later a female yeoman came around the bend of the path and froze when she saw them.

She recovered quickly and smiled pleasantly in greeting. "Captain, Commander Spock."

"Yeoman Krantz," Kirk returned, also smiling charmingly.

She shrugged. "Uh, I didn't think anybody was in here...."

Kirk nodded. "That's quite all right. There's plenty of room for everyone to share."

That was true. Couples could retain a degree of privacy while others were in other sections of the garden, but Krantz shook her head. "I was just looking for a little isolation. I think I'll retreat to the observation deck." She looked at the first officer. "I hope you're feeling much better, Mister Spock."

"Indeed, I am, Yeoman. Thank you for inquiring."

She nodded and turned to leave. A few moments later, Kirk and Spock heard the sliding of the garden's doors that signalled her departure.

The two officers were silent for awhile, Kirk continuing to rub his Vulcan's back, and Spock closed his eyes in appreciation.

After a moment, the eyes opened and he straightened. "Jim, I am concerned."

"About what?" the other asked gently.

Spock turned slightly to face him and the hand fell away from his back. "Are you in difficulty... because of our lack of activity?"

Kirk furrowed a brow, then his face brightened in understanding. "You mean because we haven't had sex in so long?"

"Yes," Spock replied, swallowing once but otherwise showing no signs of embarrassment. He'd come a long way in three years. "I know that your sexual drive is quite strong."

The captain smiled affectionately at him. He stroked the long strands of hair that fascinated him so. "I've been all right, Spock," he replied quietly. "I've been so worried about you that I haven't had much time to think about sex. There's really nothing I could do about it anyway." He grinned teasingly. "Unless you want to suggest I find a temporary partner with whom to satisfy myself."

Normally, Spock's eyebrows would have darted up in mock horror, but the Vulcan didn't have the energy to make a response that he knew was unnecessary. "I regret if you in any difficulty."

"I'm fine, Spock," the other replied seriously. "Really." He widened his eyes mischievously. "But I am looking forward to our reunion -- whenever that may be."

"I am also," Spock admitted. "I would even suggest some activity at this time, but I know my limited strength would not allow me to be very pleasing."

Kirk scooted closer to Spock on the bench and wrapped both arms around the form that yielded easily to him.

"Sex doesn't matter right now," he whispered. "All that matters is that you get better. When you're finally okay, then we'll worry about the other things."

"Agreed," Spock replied softly. He managed to return the embrace to some extent, and he rested his face against the other's neck. After a moment, he whispered, "If I had gotten this illness before we were lovers, I do not know how I would have gotten through it. I would have been in Sickbay all this time and would have been quite lonely. And it would have been extremely difficult to know others were seeing me when I was so weak and not in control." He pulled back and looked at Kirk squarely in the eye. "I can be free with you. I do not ever feel the need to hide any part of myself from you." The last two sentences were spoken in a tone of wonder and appreciation. Then he added intensely, "I do love you so, Jim."

"Oh, Spock," the human sighed, feeling his heart flutter. "You're so good to me. What did I ever do to deserve the best that anyone could ever have?"

The corners of Spock's mouth twitched slightly. "You are trying to flatter me, Jim."

Kirk was about to reply, but he was distracted by the sound of the door to the garden sliding open. He sighed. "I guess tonight isn't such a slow night after all."

"Indeed."

The captain stood and took his mate's hand. "We'd better be heading back, anyway."

Spock allowed Kirk to pull him to his feet. He leaned on the other for a moment, then straightened. The human put a supporting hand on the Vulcan's elbow and the two moved back along the path and toward the entrance. They both looked at each other in surprise when they reached the door without having run into the person they assumed had entered.

Kirk shrugged. "I guess whoever it was heard us when they opened the

door and decided not to intrude."

"Perhaps," Spock replied. "Or, possibly someone entered at the same time Yeoman Krantz left, and the noise we heard a moment ago was them leaving."

Kirk shrugged, feeling a little uncomfortable that someone may have been around without them knowing it. He tugged on the other's elbow. "Let's go, Spock."

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

A few days later, Kirk entered their cabin in the evening and found his first officer sitting in a chair and reading one of Kirk's books. The Vulcan was dressed in black uniform pants and a black, regulation undershirt.

Kirk bent down and planted a gentle kiss on an expectant mouth. "Good evening, Commander."

"I hope you enjoyed your dinner," Spock replied with a hint of amusement. "I can smell beef, garlic and pasta on your breath."

"The nose knows," Kirk sighed while moving to his desk, which was only a few feet from Spock's chair. After seating himself, he said, "I ate with Bones. He's working on an exercise schedule for you, so you can start working in the gym."

Spock closed his book. "I am pleased to hear that. It is most disconcerting having a body that is so weak. I am looking forward to being strong again."

Kirk grinned mischievously. "So am I."

The intercom beeped and he pushed a button. "Kirk here."

The face of the communications officer, Lieutenant Hadly, appeared on the screen. "Sir, you wanted to know when we were close enough to the Eridani system to have direct communication with Vulcan. The planet may be contacted now with no communication time lag."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Mister Spock will be in touch shortly to make a direct call." He flicked off the switch and smiled at his mate. "Would you like to contact your parents and let them know how you're doing?"

Spock set his book aside. "Yes. My father is not on Vulcan at this time, but I believe my mother would appreciate hearing from me."

He knew that they were worried. Kirk had notified them weeks ago that Spock was seriously ill, and later sent a short transmission saying that he would recover. Sarek and Amanda then sent a taped message expressing their concern and Amanda had wished him to 'Get better soon'. This was the first time since the crisis that the ENTERPRISE had been close enough to Vulcan for direct person-to-person communication.

Kirk got out of his chair, prepared to assist his mate. "Why don't you use the terminal in the bedroom? I've got some paperwork to do here."

Spock nodded, rose, and waved Kirk aside with a hand. "Jim, I am now quite capable of moving within our cabin by myself." He moved to the sleeping alcove, turned, and said, "I am certain my mother will want to speak with you before severing the communication."

Kirk smiled. "I'd like to speak with her, too. But I'll let you two talk alone first."

Spock nodded and moved into the sleeping alcove, the door sliding shut behind him.

Kirk sat down at his desk, sighing happily at the fact that Spock was now able to move about on his own a little bit. The Vulcan's mind was completely clear now, and Kirk was a little concerned that Spock was going to start to get bored very quickly. Hopefully, the exercise routines McCoy was putting together would help combat that, as the doctor was still insistent that it was going to be another ten days to two weeks before Spock was fit for even light duty.

Kirk picked up the first tape from his "In" basket and inserted it into his computer. He'd barely glanced at the title before the ringing of the door buzzer interrupted his concentration.

"Come."

Lieutenant Commander Parkers entered with a tape in his hand. He stood before the captain's desk with a hard expression and held out the tape. "This is a request for a transfer, sir."

Kirk's eyebrows darted up into surprise. "Transfer?" he whispered as he accepted the tape.

Parkers straightened and put his hands behind his back. "Yes, sir. I have decided to transfer to another ship."

Kirk looked the man up and down a moment, then his expression softened. "You're an excellent officer, Parkers. What's the reason?"

The other man swallowed. "They're personal reasons, sir."

Kirk gazed at the red tape in his hands. Spock. He's still in love with Spock and he can't handle it. I thought I ~~may~~^{had} be glad to see him go after what Spock told me, but, he glanced back up at the man, he really is a good officer, and I do like him. And what made him decide to transfer now?

He cleared his throat. "Mister Parkers, regulations prevent me from inquiring as to the nature of the 'personal reasons', but it's always been a policy of mine to refuse transfer requests until I've given the individual a week to reconsider. People often make hasty decisions that they later regret. I will keep your request, but I will not process it until a week has passed. If, at the end of that time, you still want a transfer, then I will grant it."

This time it was Parkers who cleared his throat. "Sir, I assure you that I have given this a great deal of thought. I find myself in a situation that is difficult to deal with."

"Are you certain that transferring to another department on this ship might not help?" Kirk asked gently.

"Yes, sir." Parker looked down at the deck.

"What about an extended leave?" Kirk asked. Maybe if you're away from Spock long enough you'll fall in love with somebody else, and we can have you back. "Perhaps some time off would help."

The other man shook his head firmly. "The only thing that could possibly help," he said hoarsely, "is if I leave this ship. And even that may not solve the problem."

Kirk winced. "It sounds serious."

Parkers straightened and looked his captain in the eye. "It is my problem, sir."

Kirk folded his hands on his desk. "Very well. But I'm sticking to my policy of not signing your request until you've had a week to mull it over."

Parkers started to reply, but the door to the sleeping alcove opened and Spock stepped into the room.

"Jim, my mother would -- " He stopped abruptly when he saw Parkers. After a moment, he brought his surprised features under control and he looked at Kirk and calmly said, "Forgive me, Captain. I wasn't aware that you had a visitor."

"I'll be there in a minute, Spock."

The Vulcan nodded and stepped back into the bedroom, letting the door slide shut behind him.

"I'll be leaving now, sir," Parkers said, "and I'll be back in a week to confirm my decision." Kirk nodded slowly at him. The scientist glanced toward the door to the sleeping alcove, then back at his captain. Hesitantly, he said, "Mister Spock looks much better."

"Yes," Kirk agreed, eyeing the other man carefully. "He should be able to return to light duty in a week or so."

"I'm glad to hear that," Parkers replied with difficulty. "Everyone on the ship has been very worried about him."

Kirk smiled softly. "I know. Everyone's concern is appreciated."

Parkers nodded curtly. "Sir." And he turned and exited the cabin.

Kirk sighed heavily. *Poor bastard.* Then, remembering that Amanda was waiting, he got up and briskly moved into the sleeping alcove.

Spock was sitting up on the edge of the bed, looking into the communications console. "Here is Jim now."

Kirk sat next to his first officer and put his arm around the Vulcan's waist. He knew that Amanda enjoyed seeing the affection between them, and over the years, Spock had mellowed enough so that such displays to close friends and family no longer bothered him.

"Jim," Amanda smiled at him. "I'm glad to see that you're looking well. I was afraid that taking care of Spock for so long would have done you in."

Kirk reached up and mussed the back of his mate's hair. "Oh, he's been a pretty good boy, behaving himself and following doctor's orders."

"He needs a haircut."

"Yes." Kirk looked at Spock pointedly. "I'll see that he gets it taken care of tomorrow."

"I don't want to tie you up, Jim. Spock said you were busy. But I just wanted to see that you were fine."

"I am. And your son is doing much better than he was a few weeks ago."

"So he told me. I was very frightened there for awhile."

"Yes, I know," Kirk said quietly. "So was I."

"I'd better be going. Thanks so much for contacting me. I love you both."

Spock held up his hand in the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Mother."

"Goodby, Amanda," Kirk said. "We love you, too."

He flipped off the screen. Then he turned to his mate and gently encouraged him to lie back on the bed. His hands began to deftly work with the fastening to the black trousers.

Spock's voice was puzzled. "Jim, what are you doing?"

"I'm taking off your pants," the other said casually. He had them open and now pulled them down the lean hips.

"Yes, that is obvious," Spock said, still puzzled "But why?"

"Because I want what's inside."

The human left the pants halfway down the thighs, then reached up and took the underwear, rolling it down to where the pants were. Then he took both garments and pushed them down to the Vulcan's ankles.

Spock was uneasy, even as he complied with Kirk's prompting to clear his legs of the clothing. "Jim, I am still relatively weak. I do not have the energy...."

"Lay back," Kirk directed, his voice soft but holding a no-nonsense tone. "No, on your side.... There, that's good."

Spock was on his side, his knees slightly bent, and he was watching Kirk with confusion. "Jim, I do not believe I have the energy...", he repeated.

"I'm doing all the work," the other told him. "You just lie there and enjoy it."

Spock yielded to the inevitable and relaxed against the bed.

Kirk gazed at the growing phallus for a moment. He knew it would never achieve the degree of hardness that Spock was capable of while in good health, but, for now, it would do.

He lay alongside Spock, facing the Vulcan, his head level with the first officer's groin. Without any preliminaries, he put his hands around the thin butt, opened his mouth, and pulled on the hips until the rising organ was inside his mouth. He gently clamped down on it and began to suck happily. Like a baby to a bottle, he thought with amusement.

After a long moment, Spock groaned softly. Then they both lay quietly, the silence of the cabin broken only by the contented, unhurried sucking noises coming from Kirk.

He's mine.

The peak was reached so slowly that the climax consisted of only slightly increased breathing from Spock and the release of a small quantity of semen that slid down Kirk's throat with ease. He gently released the depleted phallus and glanced up at his mate, pleased with the peaceful expression he saw, and patted the nearest buttock.

They lay in contented silence for a long moment.

Then the door buzzer sounded.

"Shit," Kirk muttered under his breath, getting up.

He glanced at Spock, who hadn't moved but was looking at him with mild alarm.

"Perhaps they can return later?" the Vulcan suggested hopefully.

"Who is it?" Kirk called to the door, not able to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"McCoy," came the muted response.

Spock jumped up and frantically began to put on his pants.

"Just a minute!" Kirk yelled back. To Spock, he muttered, "Isn't he early?"

"Yes." Spock was standing beside the bed, fastening his pants. "He usually comes ~~to~~ point eight-three hours later than this." Now dressed, he took a deep breath and nodded to Kirk.

The captain moved into the office area and pushed a button at his desk that released the lock.

McCoy bounded into the room with a scanner in his hand. "I'm spending the evening with Scotty and the boys, and I wanted to get Spock's nightly check-up over with." He moved past Kirk and straight into the sleeping alcove. "Let me just run a scanner over him."

Spock had sat back down on the bed. Kirk watched from the doorway while McCoy began running the scanner over the Vulcan's body, and he blushed clear down to his toes.

"Mmmm," the doctor muttered while studying his instrument. "Hormones are a little funny.... Heartbeat is nice and slow...." He furrowed his brows at the Vulcan. "Have you been meditating, Spock?"

Spock was sitting stiffly and staring at the wall. "No, doctor, I have not."

McCoy took another reading. "Your bodily functions just seem unusually 'mellow' right now. But the hormones are stirred up." The blue eyes suddenly widened in comprehension and he jerked his head up to look at Kirk... and found himself confronting a face red with embarrassment. "You two have already started that again?" he asked in disbelief.

Kirk cleared his throat and forced authority into his tone. "What do you mean 'already'? Chreeist, Bones, it's been four weeks."

"And Spock hasn't completely recovered yet," McCoy reminded him. "It's not good for him to get excited." His tone was attempting to be scolding, but it was only partially successful.

Kirk shrugged innocently. "I didn't excite him. I just mellowed him out a bit. You said so yourself."

McCoy grunted. "So I did. But this wasn't the kind of activity I had in mind when I put together his exercise schedule." He set down an orange tape he'd been holding in his palm and pushed it to Spock, who had remained quiet and straight-faced throughout the conversation. "Follow this meticulously and you should be back at your station in less than a week."

"Thank you, Doctor," The Vulcan said as he accepted the tape. "I will do so."

As McCoy headed for the door, he kept his eyes on Kirk. "And keep your hands off of him until I certify him fit."

Kirk nodded with lowered eyes. After the sliding of the doors indicated the doctor's exit, the captain looked up at his mate and a smile gradually spread across his face. He came toward the bed and plopped down on it, scooping Spock up into his arms as he did so.

"Busted by Bones," he sighed with mock despair.

"Indeed." More seriously, Spock said, "Jim, I regret I was not able to return the gratification you gave me. I --"

"That's all right," the captain interrupted softly. "I just wanted to please you. The urge to get my mouth on you came over me all of a sudden."

"I am pleased that you have such urges," Spock said with slight

amusement. "But I confess to being curious as to the catalyst."

Kirk sat back against the headboard of the bed, Spock snuggled close at his left. After a moment of thought, he said, "It was Parkers that brought it on."

Spock narrowed his brows suspiciously. "In what way?"

"He gave me a request for a transfer," Kirk replied softly. "He said it was for personal reasons."

"Oh," Spock said quietly. After a moment, he added, "I regret that his... feelings for me have caused him such distress."

"So am I. But I didn't approve it yet. I gave him the usual week to reconsider, but I don't think it will change his mind."

They were silent for a moment, then Spock reminded Kirk that he hadn't answered his original question. "Jim, how did this conversation between Mister Parkers and yourself affect your libido?"

Kirk gently tilted Spock's head up to him so he could gaze into the soft brown eyes. "After he left, I had an urge to do something to show that you are mine. It's illogical, I guess, but I felt like I needed to do something to reaffirm that we belong to each other."

"I believe I can understand those feelings," Spock said hesitantly, then added, "I know that there have been times, such as when you've met an old girlfriend from the past, that I have felt a need to be possessive of you."

Kirk hugged him, remembering a few such occasions. "Uh-huh. And I recall that most of those occasions made for some very exciting sex."

Spock considered that, then his eyebrows lifted in surprise and sudden realization. "I believe you are correct."

Kirk chuckled and kissed him on the cheek.

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

The door to the observation deck slid open, and Kirk paused appreciatively to take in the beauty of space against the darkness of the room's interior. He entered with his hands behind his back and came toward the main viewing window.

It wasn't until he halted before it that he noticed someone else was in the room. The other man studied the captain long enough to recognize

the new visitor, then turned to leave.

In that same instant, Kirk recognized the other man as Lieutenant Parkers. On impulse, he called, "Wait," to Parkers' back.

Parkers turned. "Captain," he nodded respectfully. "I was just leaving, sir."

Kirk took a deep breath, studying the other man's dark eyes in the starlight from the window. "I'd like to talk to you," he said, though he wasn't sure what it was he wanted to say. At the lieutenant's narrowing eyes, he added, "Not as captain to subordinate."

Parkers put his hands behind his back and rocked impatiently on his feet. "All right," he agreed, though his face was closed.

"Off the record, I know what your reasons are for wanting a transfer."

The other man's jaw firmed. "I see."

"Don't blame Spock," Kirk put in quickly, then wondered if it was really necessary to defend the Vulcan's integrity to someone who was already fond of him. He shrugged with a forced smile. "We always tend to eventually find out what goes on in each other's lives."

Parkers nodded impatiently. "Is there a point to this, sir?"

Kirk was a little put off by the younger man's attitude, but then realized he couldn't blame him. "I'm sorry if I'm getting too personal, but I can't help but wonder why someone would torment themselves by becoming attached to a bonded Vulcan. Vulcans mate for life."

Finally, Parkers seemed willing to talk. "Yes, I know that, sir. But I also know that Mister Spock is half human. He is a unique being unto himself."

Kirk couldn't help but smile. "Yes, he is," he said softly.

"I've never held any grudges against you, sir. In fact, this whole thing would be much easier if I could find it within myself to hate you." His voice softened and he momentarily glanced at the deck. "I was merely trying to give Mister Spock another option to consider if he wasn't completely satisfied with his current situation." He sighed heavily. "But it's rather obvious now that he is completely satisfied with you." He looked up with wide brown eyes. "And I am so envious."

"There's someone out there for you, Parkers," Kirk told him softly, though he doubted his words would give the other man much comfort. "Even if Spock was to become unhappy ^{les} with me, we couldn't break the bond without severe risk to both our sanity!" He watched the other man nod and realized

he was
at last
true

that Parkers was probably already aware of that. "Despite our combined 75% human blood, our bond is Vulcan. That part of Spock is very dominant."

Parkers turned his attention to the viewing window. "Would it really matter if it wasn't?" he asked rhetorically. "He's in love with you," he whispered. "I may be slow, but I have gathered that much from working with him and seeing the two of you together."

He suddenly looked back at Kirk. "I'm sorry if I made things difficult for him. I didn't mean to." His voice lowered again to a whisper. "I couldn't help myself, I wanted him so badly."

Not knowing what else to say, Kirk said, "I do know the feeling."

Parkers presented a bitter-sweet smile. "I'm sure you do."

They both looked up sharply when the door to the observation deck slid back. There, silhouetted against the entrance, stood a tall, lean form of unmistakable identity.

"I'd better be going," Parkers said bluntly. He started for the door ~~was~~ Spock entered the large room.

Kirk watched with a small smile as the two men nodded politely to each other in passing. Then Parkers exited through the door, and Spock approached Kirk with an arched eyebrow.

"Good evening, Commander," Kirk greeted, amazed at what the mere sight of his bondmate did to his insides. "What are you doing here?"

Spock, who was wearing a light grey jumpsuit, stood before him. "I completed my workout in the gym and, after finding you absent from our quarters, decided to look for you since I did not wish to be alone."

Kirk slipped an arm around the slim waist as the two turned to gaze out at the stars. "Is something bothering you?"

"No. It is only that I am tiring of so much isolation from others."

Kirk patted him on the butt. "Bones says it'll just be a few more days. How are you feeling?"

"Much stronger. My workouts have been quite refreshing."

Spock glanced back toward the door, then at the human. "Jim...," he began hesitantly, "do you feel the need to... 'reaffirm that we belong to each other'?"

Kirk grinned at Spock and shook his head. "Parkers and I ran into each other via coincidence. We had a little discussion. No, I'm fine,

Spock."

Spock turned to his captain and abruptly picked the other up off the floor.

"Spock! What are you doing?" Kirk demanded with a mixture of amusement and alarm. "You don't have the strength...."

"Obviously, I do," the Vulcan replied smugly as he seated himself in a large, cushioned chair with Kirk cradled in his lap.

It felt so good to be held in those strong arms that Kirk lost interest in protesting and simply rested his head against Spock's shoulder.

They watched the stars in silence for awhile. Then Kirk sighed dramatically.

Spock looked down at him with raised eyebrows.

"I'm trying to feel guilty for having you all to myself,"³ the human explained. "But I'm having very little success."

Spock lowered his head and kissed Kirk on the mouth. "It would be illogical to feel guilt about possessing one who is rightfully yours."

Kirk was already tired of the discussion. "Mmmmm. Do that again."

Spock repeated the kiss, this time making it lengthier and wrapping his arms more snugly around Kirk.

When they pulled apart, the human laid his head back on the lean shoulder. "It feels so good to feel your strength again," he whispered. "I'm so glad you're feeling so much better."

"Indeed. I have sensed your need for attention."

Kirk looked up at him suddenly. "Sensed? You mean through the bond?"

Spock nodded. "I believe so, though the feeling may also stem from the fact that I know you and your needs so well."

"I don't feel anything," Kirk said with disappointment.

"The feeling is extremely subtle. I believe only my inborn telepathic abilities allow me to detect it."

Kirk relaxed then and snuggled closer against his mate's shoulder. "Let's just sit here like this for awhile," he said as he closed his eyes. "It feels so good."

"Agreed. Perhaps I should activate the lock."

Kirk quickly shook his head. "No. Don't get up. If someone sees us, they see us."

"Very well," Spock whispered. He squeezed tighter with his arms and rested his lips against the cool human forehead.

They stayed like that for nearly an hour, until inevitable sleep beckoned them to return to their quarters.

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

"All right, Spock, you can get up."

The first officer removed himself from the table and stood beside Kirk while McCoy made some final notes. After a moment, the doctor looked at them both. "All physiological systems show normal. You're only three pounds underweight and your stress-handling factor is excellent." He smiled at his patient. "You can start doing half shifts tomorrow. If you aren't feeling any fatigue after a few days, you can go ahead and return to full duty."

Kirk breathed a big sigh of relief and smiled proudly at his mate.

"You two still having trouble with the bond?" McCoy asked.

Kirk tapped his head. "We can feel it, but there's still very little telepathic communication."

"But it's better than it was?" McCoy verified.

Kirk nodded. "Yes. It's very gradual, but we can tell that it's coming back."

McCoy nodded with satisfaction and Kirk and Spock exited Sickbay. When they passed by one of the recreation rooms, Spock paused and said, "Jim, I know that Lieutenant Uhura is usually in this room at this hour." He indicated the door. "I have not yet had a chance to thank her personally for her thoughtful gift. I wish to do so now."

Kirk nodded. "Okay. I'll be in our cabin."

The two parted and Kirk continued on his way. When he came to his cabin he found Parkers standing outside, leaning against the bulkhead. The man straightened when Kirk approached.

"Sir, I wish to speak with you, if you have a moment."

"Certainly, Mister Parkers," Kirk said as he stepped into his office.
"I guess your week is up."

"Yes, sir, it is."

The door slid closed behind them both and Kirk gestured to the chair in front of his desk while taking the one behind it.

Parkers shook his head. "I'll just be a minute, sir."

Kirk gazed at him. "You haven't changed your mind," he realized.

"No, sir, I haven't."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mister Parkers. It'll be unfortunate to lose someone with your capabilities."

"Thank you, sir."

"We'll be stopping off at Starbase 29 for leave in a few days. We can drop you off there provided Starfleet approves -- which I'm sure they will -- and you can await reassignment." His tone softened. "I'm sorry things didn't work out for you here."

The man smiled, but the gesture held a hint of sadness. "The ENTERPRISE is a fine ship, Captain. I will miss serving aboard her."

Kirk nodded. "I'll give you a good recommendation, and I'm sure that Mister Spock will, too."

"Thank you, sir."

The conversation seemed to be at an end, but, as was so often the case, Parkers grew hesitant and spoke shyly. "I just want you to know, Captain, that I really admire what you and Mister Spock have together."

"You're very kind, Mister Parkers. And I've no doubt that there is a special someone out there for you, too." There was an uncomfortable silence, then he said, "I'm sure you'll be successful in whatever you do."

"Thank you, sir."

"Is there anything else?"

"No, sir."

There was another uncomfortable silence, followed by Kirk's soft, "Dismissed."

Parkers abruptly turned and left the cabin.

XXX XXX XXX XXX XXX

Kirk sat on the bridge, bored, and thumping the arms of his chair with his fingers. The ENTERPRISE was still some thirty hours away from Starbase 29 and there was little to do in the meantime. Once there, the crew was granted a week's leave, and he was grateful Spock was healthy enough to go planetside. He hadn't figured out yet what they should do with their week of leisure, though he assumed Spock was more desperate for some sunshine and fresh air than even the most stale crewmember. Though he had followed orders well, Spock hadn't enjoyed the six weeks he'd spent almost entirely in bed.

A yeoman brought a tray of coffee and he accepted the first cup which was offered to him. He drank quietly, his thoughts turning to Parkers. He hoped the best for the man, and was sorry that he hadn't been able to resolve his feelings for Spock. The more he thought about it, the more he was sure it was Parkers who had slipped into the gardens over a week before when he and Spock had been visiting there. He suspected the man had heard some of their conversation when they both got a little emotional, and had somehow slipped out. In any case, his fantasies of ever having a relationship with Spock had been destroyed with the harsh reality that the Vulcan's heart was possessed by Kirk.

The captain couldn't help but smile smugly at that thought.

And yes, Spock, you own my heart, too.

Indeed.

The response was so unexpected -- and so vibrant -- that Kirk almost gasped out loud. Spock!

The bond blossomed open, filling his mind with the essence he'd missed so much these past weeks.

Spock! You're all right! We're all right!

So it would appear.

I'm coming, he promised. He stood and trotted up to the turbolift calling, "Scotty, you have the conn," back over his shoulder. He entered the lift and left a group of puzzled faces behind him.

It is not necessary to leave your post, Jim.

Shut up! I'm coming!

Even Spock couldn't hide his pleasure that his bondmate would soon be joining him.

Kirk walked as quickly as he could down the corridor of deck five. When his cabin door slid back to admit him, Spock was standing there waiting for him.

They simply beamed at each other for a moment, then Kirk took the Vulcan's arm and pulled him into the bedroom. He grappled for a fine-boned hand and shakily put it to his temple -- just as they both collapsed onto the bed on their sides.

Spock closed his eyes and concentrated.

The bond flared open with a vengeance. Their love-starved minds absorbed each other in frantic reunion, and they both lay there and let themselves blend into one.

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It was only complete exhaustion that let their sated minds drift apart nearly an hour later. After Spock's hand dropped away from Kirk's temple, they both opened their eyes and simply looked at each other with tender smiles. Neither moved, and the only sound was their quiet breathing.

Finally, Kirk reached out with a hand and ran a finger down the center of Spock's nose. Then he gently grasped a green-tinged cheek and leaned forward for a kiss.

The kiss was lengthy and deep, and Spock slowly rolled over onto his back so Kirk could maneuver himself on top of him. There was no mistaking the hardness between the legs of the prone form.

Kirk slipped his hand inside the trousers. He had only released Spock's mouth long enough for them both to take a breath, but they were now kissing passionately again. His hand quickly found the hard, heated column, and he grasped it, then pulled on it firmly.

Beneath him, Spock groaned and squirmed. Then, as though realizing Kirk had been the one deprived the longest, the Vulcan found the human's stiff phallus and performed a similar action upon it.

Kirk pulled back. "Don't," he gasped. "I've got to have you. I know I won't last long, but I've got to be inside you."

Both weak with passion, Kirk got to his knees and leaned over Spock to get to a bedside drawer. Spock slipped his pants off, and his shirt soon

followed.

Kirk found the tube he was looking for, and he set it aside and quickly undressed. Once nude, he made little fuss of applying the lubricant to Spock, and then to himself.

"I'm not going to last long," he warned again as he maneuvered himself into position.

"I believe I will not, either," Spock replied hoarsely.

"Easy does it," the human soothed out of habit. He pushed against Spock and, on the second try, the tight, tender flesh yielded to him. "That's good, that's good," he praised the Vulcan who, as always, resisted the instinct to expel him.

He sighed, feeling his scrotum come to rest against warm buttocks.

Below him, Spock whimpered softly and then released a stream of semen.

Kirk's fevered eyes moved back and forth between his lover's face and the proof of his passion.

"Damn you're beautiful," he whispered.

When the contractions stopped, he carefully lowered himself until he was lying on top of a furred chest. Spock's warm arms came around him.

"You feel so good."

Spock's arms tightened.

Kirk moved his arms in under the Vulcan and squeezed the beloved form while he began a gentle pumping motion.

"I love you."

Spock locked his legs around the human's back.

Kirk moved harder and faster, then groaned elaborately when release was upon him. He collapsed on top of Spock, arms and legs spread at their sides.

Spock removed his legs from the slick back and held Kirk tight against him, his mouth toying with the soft hair beneath it.

Finally, Kirk looked up at him with slitted eyes and a sated smile. He gave the warm lips a quick kiss.

"Welcome back, Commander."

Though Vulcans never lie, I have lied to you
more times than I can count;
committed falsehood upon falsehood.

I have concealed my love,
denied my truth,
and there is no health in me.

But Jim, I have watched you looking
and have been afraid.

Is it my reality you seek?
Or do you need the lie?

Forgive my cowardice; I would not risk
one smallest smile, one careless touch,
for hypothetical ecstasy.

Jim --

would you hear the truth if I spoke it?
Could you allow yourself to believe?

HIDDEN TRUTHS

bonita kale

INTERGRATION

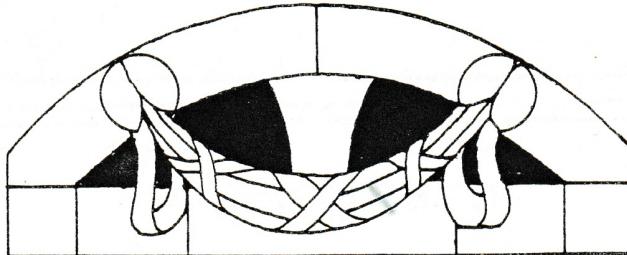
d.a. martin

There is a stillness in me now.
The ending of a questing
I thought forever my lot.
That my duality should fade,
Merged into this unique one,
Seems something spun of dreams.

But I know this is no dream
To end in lonely wakefulness
When I sought answers
To questions I could not form.
I sought this still tranquility
In places it could not be found.

That I could not be wholly Vulcan
I knew but refused to admit.
Times of human pain drove me
To seek a peace not mine.
My only moments of contentment
Found within your caring sphere.

Now I am older, wiser, surer.
Knowing, finally, I can be only
Who I am, Spock, and no other.
I will question and seek no longer,
But know wonder still in my soul
That you love this patchwork being.



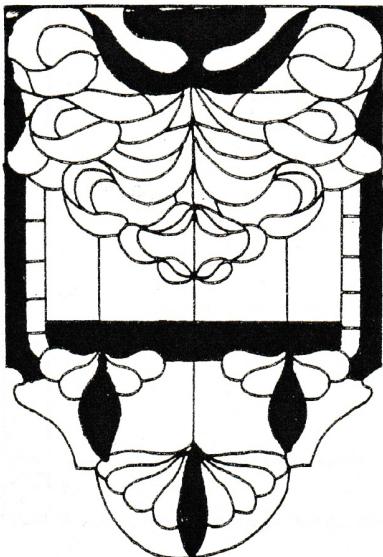
CHRYsalis

Your tears,
crystal shards
That pierce my heart,
leaving spots of green
Upon the dying form
of what once I was.

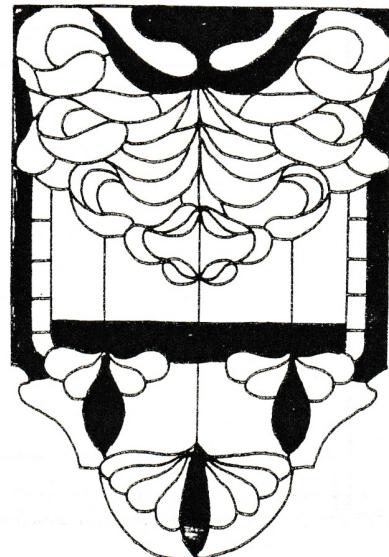
Your smile,
a golden brilliance,
Rivalling the sun
in splendor,
Bursting the Vulcan chrysalis
to set free my soul.

SHADOWS

Your quiet companionship,
The unspoken feeling
Within your dark eyes...
Sorrow fades
When I feel your presence.
I am not alone
In the shadowed vale...
You are my comfort
For all my life.



SANDEE MAXWELL



JOURNEY

Kate Lloyd

"Now, I have work to do, so I don't want to hear a peep out of either of you." With that, Doctor McCoy exited Sickbay, followed by an amused -- and impressed -- Nurse Chapel.

From the glint in Spock's eyes, Kirk assumed that his first officer was strongly tempted to make one of his unusual rejoinders. *Something along the lines of 'I fail to understand why you believe I would suddenly be compelled to imitate bird song, Doctor,'* Kirk mused. However, the Vulcan looked exhausted after his ordeal, and apparently decided he lacked the strength to engage Doctor McCoy in their favorite pastime.

The captain glanced across Sickbay to Sarek. The ambassador appeared to be asleep, helped along by the drugs he'd been administered. Settling back into the bed with a sigh, Kirk closed his eyes. He heard Amanda speaking quietly to Spock, then her footsteps leaving the room.

It felt good to be able to relax, despite the ache in his back from the Orion's knife. *We all owe a lot to McCoy,* Kirk thought. *I'll have to thank him properly later. Good old Bones, never gets enough credit for saving our hides. He deserves the luxury of scolding us.*

Kirk smiled to himself, remembering incidents in his childhood. He hadn't thought of it in years, but was reminded suddenly of his father. Sometimes, when he and Sam were little, they'd keep on talking and rough housing long after they'd been put to bed. Half the fun was in waiting for their father to put in an appearance. They'd hear him coming down the

hallway to their bedroom and quickly pull the covers up over their heads, pretending to be asleep. George Kirk would stand in the doorway, while they tried to stifle their giggles.

After what seemed an eternity, a stern voice would say, "I know you two are awake. Now, your mother and I are trying to get some sleep. It is way past your bedtime. Do you hear me?"

Footsteps would approach closer, until he was standing between the boys' beds. Then their dad would yank the covers back and the two boys would collapse in laughter. It was a favorite game, judging how much noise they could make before the jig was up. Knowing that he knew that they knew that he knew they weren't really asleep.

Sam and Jim would lay in bed, looking up at the big man towering over them. He wasn't really angry, at least not yet. "What's so funny?" he would ask, but they could never tell him. "I don't want to hear another peep out of you two tonight." Then he would march down the hall. They would occasionally hear him laughing, and their mother's voice in the distance. Soon after, they would whisper their good nights and fall asleep, completely worn out from all their nonsense.

What utter security he and Sam had shared as boys. I haven't thought of that in years. It's nice to think of Dad and Sam without that aching sense of loss. At least, now I have Spock and Bones, too. I should be following Bones' advice and getting some rest, Kirk admonished himself. But he was still too tense from the recent excitement and needed to wind down, talk it out.

Admit it, Kirk told himself sternly, you need to talk to Spock. "Spock?" he called softly. "Are you awake?"

Deep brown Vulcan eyes opened instantly. "Captain, are you all right? Should I call Doctor McCoy?"

"No, I'm fine, Spock. Just wanted to talk to you, if you're not too tired."

"Not at all, Captain. What did you wish to discuss?"

"Well, I...." Kirk hesitated. "It's difficult to talk quietly when you're way over there." Easing onto his side, Kirk carefully rolled himself off the bed.

Spock watched in some alarm. "Captain... Jim, you should not be moving about, your wound might open up again."

"I'm okay, just trading beds for a little while. If you don't mind, that is," Kirk grinned.

Spock shook his head, silently moving to one side of the bed. Kirk slowly levered himself onto the edge, laying down next to Spock. "That's better, now we can talk."

Spock was very conscious of the body next to his, their shoulders and arms touching. His friend, his t'hy'la. Spock felt a sudden warmth suffuse his entire body as he thought of this man so dear to him. The man who had risked his health in a pretense so that Spock could aid his father.

"I want to thank you," Spock began. Then stopped uncharacteristically, at something of a loss for words.

"Thank me, Spock? What for?"

"Coming to the Bridge. Deceiving me into believing that you were well so I could go to my father."

"I could do no less for you, Spock. I know you were only doing your 'logical' duty. Yet you would never have forgiven yourself if your father had died as a result."

"Possibly," Spock admitted. "Did you never think that I also could not... forgive... myself if you had died through such an action?" he asked quietly.

Kirk turned his head to look at the Vulcan so still next to him. "Emotions, Spock?" he chided gently, then continued before Spock could respond.

"Do you have any idea, Spock, of how I feel about you?" He felt the Vulcan move, his head turning toward Sarek's bed. "He can't hear us, he's sound asleep. I don't mean to disturb you by speaking of my human emotions, Spock, but I must.

"Spock, when you told me that Ambassador Sarek and his wife were your parents, I was stunned, to put it mildly. Here I called myself your friend and I didn't even know so basic a fact as the names of your parents!"

Spock shook his head, about to speak. "Shush, Spock, please let me finish. Then I promise, I'll let you say whatever you want, okay?" Spock nodded, fighting for control, wanting to soothe the pain in his friend's voice.

"I'd loved you for a long time as a friend, but my feelings altered drastically after our trip to Vulcan. I don't believe I've ever experienced such a strong urge to protect another being as I felt for you then. Maybe it's similar to the instinct a mother has for her child. I don't know, Spock, all I can say is that you are part of my flesh, my mind, my heart and my soul. I actually didn't care about my career at that moment, I just wanted you to be safe. When it was over and we were back on the ENTERPRISE,

the smile you gave me was the greatest reward I'd ever received.

"For a long time now I've faced one hell of a dilemma, Spock. To speak or not to speak, that was literally the question." Kirk laughed humorlessly. "Simply by saying the words, expressing my emotions so openly, I may well be placing the one I love in an unbearable position. Yet, now I've decided the time has come to bring this matter out into the open. One last thing, Spock, then I'll follow Bones' advice and shut up. If you wish it, I will never mention this subject to you again, I promise."

Spock sensed the tenseness in the compact body and heard the sincerity in Kirk's voice. How he had longed for and dreaded this moment. "Jim," he said softly, and was answered by a faint sigh of relief as Kirk registered Spock's use of his first name. "If I am rather embarrassed to be discussing such human concepts as love, it is only because I have spent a lifetime attempting to suppress that emotion in particular. Mere words cannot adequately convey my feelings for you, but I love you, too, Jim."

Kirk was unable to reply verbally; he simply responded by clasping the warm Vulcan hand in his. Spock felt Kirk's whole body trembling. Turning on his side, Spock brought his free hand to Kirk's face, gently brushing the soft cheek.

"Jim?" Spock questioned anxiously. "Have I troubled you in some way?"

"No, Spock," Kirk laughed through tearing eyes. "You've made me happier than I ever dreamed possible."

"I love you, Jim, but," Spock teased, "I will never understand humans."

"Oh, yes you will." Kirk brought Spock's hand to his lips, pressing a tender kiss on the palm. Spock's hand jerked, as if he'd received an electric shock. "You do understand," Kirk murmured seductively, "that when I say I love you, that includes physical love?"

"Yes," Spock breathed, dazzled by the glow in the hazel eyes. In an attempt to maintain some sense of reality, Spock couldn't stop himself from continuing. "Surely, Sickbay is not the logical place to begin such activities?"

Laughing, then groaning, Kirk clutched his side. "Oh, don't make me laugh, you Vulcan, you! First on the agenda is getting us out of here. Are my quarters -- or yours -- an appropriate enough place for you to consider our discussion?"

"Indeed. How do you intend to persuade Doctor McCoy to agree to our release?"

"A little flattery, a touch of bribery. Just take notes, Mister

Spock."

Spock watched his t'hy'la carefully make his way back to his own bed. He hoped Doctor McCoy would be amenable to Kirk's suggestion. Already Spock was anticipating the turn their future 'discussions' might take.

Kirk pressed the button on the side of his bed. "Doctor, would you mind coming in here for a moment?"

McCoy was through the door before the captain's sentence was finished. "Are you still awake? Maybe I'd better give you another pain killer. What's the matter?"

"Bones, Bones," Kirk soothed, "nothing's the matter. I simply have a small favor to ask."

"Oh?" McCoy's tone was definitely suspicious.

Kirk assumed his most angelic expression. "I know you said I have to stay put for at least two days, and you're absolutely right."

"Yes, but...?" McCoy's voice was not encouraging.

"Well, it's so boring in Sickbay. Couldn't I be confined to quarters instead? I'd really be more comfortable and you don't need to monitor me anyway."

"I guess it wouldn't hurt," McCoy admitted grudgingly.

"Spock, too? I swear, we'll stay in bed for two days, even three if you insist."

"Hmmm. Three days, then, and you've got a deal -- starting tomorrow. Tonight you're staying right here so I can keep an eye on you."

*** *** *** *** ***

The next morning, McCoy strolled into Sickbay, scanner in hand. He quickly checked over an impatient Kirk, then moved over to the stoically waiting Vulcan. "You're a little flushed, Mister Spock. No temperature, although it's difficult to tell with these crazy Vulcan readings. Heart rate faster than usual, too."

"I assure you, Doctor, I am making satisfactory progress." Spock strove to keep any hint of anxiety from his voice while Kirk winked at him behind McCoy's back.

"Okay, you're both free to go. And I don't want to see either of you

out of quarters for three days. Scotty can handle things just fine. Remember, I still make house calls."

"Thanks, Bones -- for everything." Kirk glanced toward Spock's bed. "You're one hell of a doctor, Doctor. Spock and I will follow your prescription to the letter. Guaranteed."

McCoy watched them leave Sickbay. "I hope so," he muttered.

"Have no fear, Doctor McCoy. I am quite certain that Captain Kirk and my son will spend the specified three days in bed."

The voice, though quiet, made McCoy jump. "Ambassador Sarek! How long have you been awake?"

"Quite some time, Doctor. My condition is rapidly improving."

McCoy could have sworn he saw Sarek smile, but dismissed it as unlikely. "What is going on around here? Everybody's being so agreeable."

A raised eyebrow was his only answer.

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"Shall we go to your cabin, Spock? It will be warmer and more comfortable for you. I was so damn worried about you, I was almost grateful for the distraction the Orion's provided. You might have died giving so much blood, even with the drug to speed up replenishment. That is, if the drugs didn't kill you first."

"There is no need for further concern, Jim. I estimate a full return to my usual state of health in...."

"Three days?" Kirk suggested, thrilled to see a smile curve the Vulcan's lips.

Kirk paused just inside Spock's quarters, surveying his surroundings with satisfaction. He remembered vividly the first time he'd been welcomed here. He'd been so delighted with the Vulcan furnishings, his fingers itching to touch the alien objects. Spock, who seldom had anyone in his private domain, had observed Kirk with indulgence. Normally, he disliked the idea of anyone touching his possessions, but had immediately allowed Kirk to investigate. He had watched the human run gentle hands over his lyre, his books and stroke the hangings on the wall of his bed area. He was secretly proud of Kirk's obvious appreciation.

"I've always felt so at home here, Spock. It's so cozy and restful. I shouldn't feel so nervous, but I do. I've never made love with a man

before. More than that, I've never loved anyone, man or woman, as I do you."

"I am also uncertain. My experience of the physical aspects of a relationship is extremely limited. However, I do not anticipate any difficulties in overcoming our shyness."

"You mean, once in bed, everything will follow naturally?" Kirk teased. "Very well." His voice grew suddenly husky. "You'll have to help me, Spock." A burning heat began in his belly, spreading through his entire body.

He was answered by the flame in Spock's eyes. "How may I help you, Jim?"

"Would you like to begin by undressing me? With these bandages, it's not easy for me to bend."

"I would like that very much," was the whispered reply.

As Kirk eased onto the bed, Spock bent to his task. He drew off the slippers, then the robe Kirk had worn from Sickbay. Next, his fingers were unfastening the waist of the baggy pajama bottoms. With a distinct tremor in his hands, Spock removed the last impediment to his feasting gaze.

"You are so beautiful." Spock's hand was drawn irresistibly to the swelling penis. "So beautiful."

"So are you," Kirk responded breathlessly. "The parts I can see, at any rate," he hinted. He pulled the Vulcan to sit next to him on the bed. Spock watched in fascination as Kirk undid the tie on his own robe, then tugged the black t-shirt free of the trousers. The next thing he knew, strong hands were moving delicately over his back and sides. Spock gasped at the sensations and hurriedly removed the remainder of his clothing. His arousal matched Kirk's. Neither needed much beyond the stimulation of the other's mere presence.

It was Kirk's turn to murmur 'beautiful'. Then he smiled, holding out his hands again. "I'm glad McCoy's not here, I'm in such a fever of desire for you, my love."

Spock quickly moved to lay beside Kirk, wanting to crush the beloved body closer, but trying to restrain himself. The bandages formed a constant reminder of Kirk's weakened state. Then Kirk pressed his lips to Spock's in a kiss that sealed them to each other for all eternity. Someone moaned, one or both, it didn't matter. With lips and tongues they explored new territory until Spock reluctantly pulled away.

"Jim," the deep voice penetrated Kirk's haze. "Perhaps we should stop now. I do not wish to cause you pain."

Kirk thrust his groin against Spock's, hardened cocks rubbed enticingly. "I'll be in worse pain if we don't continue. Surely, between the two of us, we can arrive at a solution."

Brown eyes sparkled at the challenge. "I shall endeavor to achieve a satisfactory solution, Captain," Spock teased. The expression on the Vulcan's face took Kirk's breath away; his body writhed under Spock's ardent gaze.

Firm fingers caressed Kirk, followed by warm, moist kisses, as Spock worked his way down Kirk's belly to his groin. Spock had been concerned that his own lack of sexual experience would prove a problem in satisfying his t'hy'la. However, Spock soon discovered that he knew instinctively how to please the human, if the soft sighs and moans were an accurate indication. Spock continued his efforts with renewed enthusiasm.

As the dark head bowed to take the throbbing penis into the wet heat of his mouth, Spock became aware through the blaze of his desire, of hands on his own thighs, turning him around in bed. Spock obliged without ceasing his attentions. A shock streaked through his system as Kirk began to suck his cock. The universe was narrowed down to one of exquisite physical sensation, a giving and taking without end.

Kirk was thrusting deeper into Spock's mouth with Spock matching him, helpless in their mutual need. They reached orgasm together in a peak of blinding ecstasy, tasting and swallowing warm semen. As awareness returned, Spock bestowed a final kiss on the tip of Kirk's organ, then gently moved to gather the human in his arms. Kirk snuggled close, running idle fingers through the hair on Spock's chest.

"You are every dream of love I've ever had." Kirk's breath gusting across his chest sent shivers down Spock's spine.

Spock's fingers drew patterns on Kirk's neck and shoulders. "It is a shame these bandages are not gone so I can touch you everywhere," he whispered.

"I agree. I wish I could keep you here forever, with nothing to do but make love continuously. I've had fantasies about you for a long time."

"When we are both completely healthy, perhaps I will confess some of my fantasies regarding you."

"I'm looking forward to it." Kirk grinned. "We have your parents to thank for this," he added.

"My parents?"

"Yeah." Kirk laughed at Spock's shocked tone. "They helped me decide

that now was the time to speak to you about us. I was confused at first. Your father in particular was so cold and distant. I was amazed when Amanda informed me you hadn't spoken as father and son for eighteen years. I was taken aback at the way your father ordered your mother around, too. It didn't fit with what little I knew about Vulcans. I mean, I can't see anyone giving an order to T'Pau."

"In some respects, Jim, my father is as much a mixture of two worlds as I am. He is a Vulcan, yet married to a human. He follows Vulcan teachings, yet as an ambassador he must also adapt to the customs of the societies in which he finds himself. It is a difficult balance to maintain."

"I understand that now, Spock. Also, I came to realize that Sarek loves your mother very much, despite it's being illogical. And Amanda certainly loves you and your father. I guess I figured if love was possible between Sarek and Amanda, it was possible for us. So, in a strange way, their example gave me the courage to speak to you."

Spock was so quite that Kirk grew afraid. "Oh, gods, Spock! Have I made things worse? Just when you and your family are reunited, I come barging in. What if your father won't accept us and won't speak to you for another eighteen years?" Kirk asked in a horrified voice.

"Shush...." Spock pressed reassuring kisses on the parted lips. "I foresee no difficulty in our relationship as far as my parents are concerned, T'hy'la."

"You're kidding?"

"Vulcans never 'kid', Jim."

"The hell they don't!" Kirk raised an eyebrow in a fair imitation of Spock. "Anyway, how do you know it won't be a problem?"

"Jim, same-sex bondings are not prohibited on Vulcan. They are unusual, of course since males are bonded at the age of seven to females. If, as occasionally happens, the bond is not mutually satisfying, it may be broken and a different bond formed. It is rare now, but in ancient days on Vulcan, warriors frequently bonded with each other. The incident with T'Pring would never have reached such extremes if I had remained on Vulcan. Being so long apart, we never truly knew each other, even with the bond. And by that time it couldn't be severed, since I was already in Plak Tow."

"Sarek's disagreement with me was due only in part to a difference over my choice of career. I believe he was also afraid that I would die going into Pon Farr, either because I would not be able to return to Vulcan in time, or T'Pring would no longer accept me after years away in Starfleet. He was very nearly correct on both counts."

Kirk's arm tightened protectively around his lover. "You have said that was when you first realized you were in love with me, Jim. When I thought I had killed you, I knew bitterly just how much I loved you. I wanted to die then, too.

"I am sure my parents were informed of the incident. They would only feel gratitude toward the one who saved my life. I do know that if my father objected to our new intimacy, he would have said so in Sickbay. Therefore, I assume...."

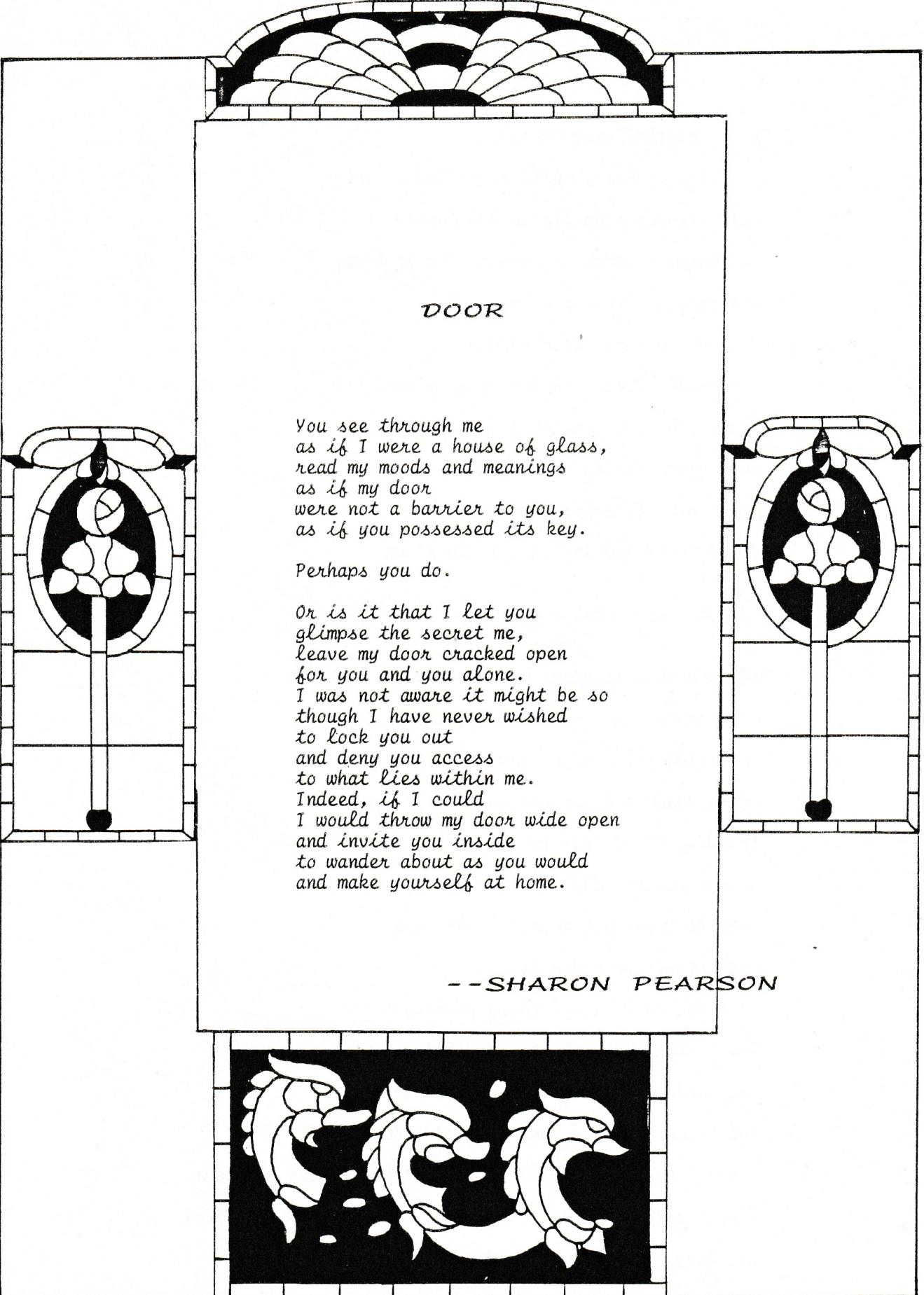
Kirk froze. "Sickbay?" he stammered. "Your father was asleep, Spock. How could he...?"

"Sarek was merely in a light trance, Jim, perfectly capable of hearing every word we said. That was the reason for my eagerness to accompany you here."

"Oh?" Kirk's eyes narrowed, recovering from the shock. "I trust that wasn't the only reason, Spock?"

A hot mouth met Kirk's in a bruising kiss before moving to lick and bite a small, rounded earlobe. Kirk found his hand guided to press against a hardening Vulcan penis.

"What do you think, Jim?"



DOOR

You see through me
as if I were a house of glass,
read my moods and meanings
as if my door
were not a barrier to you,
as if you possessed its key.

Perhaps you do.

Or is it that I let you
glimpse the secret me,
leave my door cracked open
for you and you alone.
I was not aware it might be so
though I have never wished
to lock you out
and deny you access
to what lies within me.
Indeed, if I could
I would throw my door wide open
and invite you inside
to wander about as you would
and make yourself at home.

-- SHARON PEARSON

CAVERNS OF WIND

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Wind whistles from behind,
circling my head, chilling my bones
with its haunting cry of desolation.

Thickness settles beneath my breast bone,
a sickness hovering in my soul
darkens my sight with pain as
one small shuttle departs for Vulcan.

Stars echo the scream of denial
that never leaves my lips as my
heart rips from its moorings to
drift, once and forever, truly alone.

'Spock! Don't leave me... don't...!'

Along a thin stretched cord anchored
deep in my mind, I feel your quiver,
a hesitation, a deep gasp of pain
at my touch and for one second hope surges
throwing blood into my arteries with a
vengeance, pounded by my soul's heart
only to cease all together when you,
with steel-ice control,
continue on your ill-fated journey.

Now I stand on a crumbling cliff,
grey skies overhead, green ocean below,
and I can only see sand-reds of Vulcan.

I don't hear surf pounding in rhythmic swells of water,
I hear wind whistles through the dark cavern of my mind
swirling 'round towering dunes of sand.

ODD MAN OUT

Lynn Shomei

"Personal log, stardate 5734.2. The captain finally came to me last night, with timid statements of his love for me. A part of me had been becoming extremely impatient over this last year, and I was more than happy to welcome him on a more personal level." Spock's voice was an absent monotone as he remembered every detail of the intimacies they had shared the night before. "After overcoming his initial reticence, he was as a man dying of thirst, drinking of the feelings I reciprocated, drinking of my body with an eager need that almost overwhelmed me. We coupled until he was completely spent, then we fondled and held each other until he slept. He wanted to drink of my mind, I felt it in his thoughts. But that I will not allow, not for some time yet.

"Another part of me mourned his coming, for it taught me that I possess yet another emotion: regret. I will cause pain to another human whom I love, a pain we both knew he would eventually have to endure. But though logic showed us it would happen, I sincerely regret being the bringing of this pain.

"I have meditated; I am calm now, though the emotional turmoil was extreme. I have focused my thoughts toward my body, and I will have more control over it tonight than I have attempted in years. I will use my body to give him as much pleasure as he can bear, this last time. Then, in the morning, I must tell him that our sexual relationship has ended." Spock checked his unfailing time sense. "It is 2204.021. McCoy will be in his quarters, waiting. I must go now. Off." The recorder clicked off on command and Spock rose, looking once more around his quarters. All was in order, as it always was. It felt different, however, for he could feel his captain's presence in the rooms now. It was paradoxical that what he had desired for so long brought him such sorrow, as well.

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The announcer sounded before Spock let himself into the doctor's quarters; McCoy was seated at his desk, working, waiting. Immediately, he flipped off the screen and rose to greet the Vulcan.

"You're five minutes late," he smiled, sliding his arms around the warm, slender waist. "What happened?"

"I was finishing a log entry."

"Oh." The human's gentle kiss hello temporarily ended the conversation. Spock returned it with passion, holding the human's head in his hands and insistently pressing his tongue against the soft lips until they parted at his demand. His hips settled closer to McCoy's, moving gently against him, stirring him into a rapid arousal.

"Don't feel like talking tonight, huh?" McCoy breathed when he pulled away, his hands sliding down to grasp Spock's firm buttocks. The outline of his hardening erection dragged pointedly over Spock's own hardening flesh.

"No." And the Vulcan kissed him again, then unceremoniously scooped the light human up and carried him to the bed. Spock took his time undressing the doctor, letting his lips follow the tunic up McCoy's lightly haired chest, capturing a nipple and sucking as he pulled the shirt off and dropped it on the floor. McCoy's sudden gasp for breath pleased him. Quickly, he opened McCoy's trouser fly, slipping his hands underneath the waistband and back, fingers kneading the muscles of buttocks as they pushed the fabric down over slim hips.

Again he followed the receding fabric with his mouth, kissing quickly down a thigh and back up, carefully avoiding the now-stiff erection at eye level. Spock looked up to meet eyes already clouding with passion, a mouth half open taking in deep breaths, gently rising and falling chest; he wanted to remember every touch, every sight, every feeling of this night. McCoy's fingers were entwining in his hair, urging him, and Spock obliged, leaning forward to lick the hard, satin smooth penis, encircling the glans with his tongue before taking as much of the shaft as he could into his throat.

"Aaannhhh," McCoy groaned and thrust forward helplessly. Spock decided that the memory of sounds would be the most important of all. Before the human could become too engrossed in his attentions, Spock pulled away and stripped off his own uniform.

"Lie down, Leonard," he breathed, and met instant compliance. McCoy lay on his side, a hand reaching out to him.

"You haven't been like this in a long time," McCoy whispered, grabbing a hand and pulling the Vulcan down to the bed.

"Like what?" he asked, sidling up against the cooler flesh, pulling it closer to his body.

"Um," McCoy was quickly becoming distracted, fingers running patterns over Spock's lean, powerful shoulders. "Excited. Hungry."

Spock translated. "I have always felt a hunger, a need for you in one capacity or another," he murmured, letting his hands play over firm flesh, "and I always will." Unwilling to let the doctor talk and thereby learn too much too soon, Spock silenced him with his mouth. Wasting no time, he kissed down the human's body, tarrying on the begging, thrusting erection until McCoy was moaning and wriggling under his ministrations, then pushing McCoy's thighs apart and moving even loser. Hot breath stirred the hairs on McCoy's testicles, causing him to shudder violently.

"Spock -- " he moaned, knowing what the Vulcan wanted; the same thing he suddenly wanted. When he felt warm hands grasp his buttocks and an even warmer tongue searching for -- and finding -- his anus, he almost spasmed. "Yessss," he hissed. "Oh, please, yet. I want you inside me." The human forgot his entire life in the sudden heat of their sharing. There was only the sound of bodies squirming against the bedcovers as Spock continued to probe the tight pucker of flesh with his tongue, until finally he sat up between the wide-spread legs, pushing McCoy's knees up and back until the doctor replaced his hands, holding his legs wide apart. Spock took only a second to position himself.

"Rest assured, there is nothing I wish to do more at this moment," Spock whispered, then he thrust forward, letting the head of his penis open the way for him into the human's willing body. A hiss of air was the only indication of pain, and Spock felt an agonizing wrench in his abdomen. McCoy enjoyed slightly violent sex, a small amount of pain mixed with the pleasure. *If only this was the most pain I will cause you tonight....* He thrust again, harder, a shake of his head pushing away the pain his heart felt for the human, and McCoy surged up to meet the impalement. In mere moments he was thrusting strongly into the tight, moist channel of flesh, his hands finding McCoy's cock and rubbing it in tempo with his movements. McCoy's fingers were on his forearms, nails dragging down to wrists and leaving tiny green welts in their wake, and with that sensation, Spock let his body free, allowing it to respond to any need the human expressed.

The strong, deep thrusts of his penis were flinging the human to ecstasy, he could feel it in the grasping hands, the hips that thrust to meet him, the tight contractions of muscle around his erection. Another deep thrust and a moan slipped from McCoy's throat, still another and the cooler body trembled. The cock in Spock's hands stiffened further then jerked and he moved a palm over the head, preparing. A last, long plunge into the tight rectum and McCoy cried out his pleasure, his semen shooting

into Spock's waiting palm. Spock cupped his hand, then rubbed the silken-textured fluid over the head and shaft, increasing the sensations before he allowed his body its own release.

The pleasure he shared with McCoy was intense, as it had been from the first time. On the first burst McCoy cried out his name, still shaking through his own climax, his joy obvious that his pleasure was shared, and gripped Spock's cock with his anal muscles even more firmly. The Vulcan didn't deny the pleasure in the sensations of his body, but neither did he give himself completely to them. McCoy must be completely satisfied, and he kept his body and mind focused on that. As often as McCoy had given him ecstasy, it was more important to Spock to return that pleasure this night than to selfishly receive it. Two more quick thrusts and he was still, waiting as the human's orgasm slowly receded. The rosy penis was already beginning to soften; without a pause, Spock pulled out of the human's body and settled his mouth gently over the tiring erection, licking it clean.

"Spock -- easy -- " There was no need for the warning. Spock was extremely gentle as he suckled the oversensitive flesh, his fingers grasping the base to help maintain its stiffness. After a moment, he raised his head.

"I have only just begun, Leonard, and you must cooperate," he said in a deep velvet voice. "I gave you this first release only to increase your stamina; what I wanted tonight was to have you within my body, for as long as you can possibly maintain yourself." It was not a lie. Spock wanted very much to enjoy that act with McCoy one last time. If the human recognized Spock's unusual behavior he didn't show it. Instead, he sat up and pulled the lean body to his, hugging the Vulcan close and kissing him.

"If that's really what you want, then let's take a quick shower," he whispered against a pointed ear. "That'll revive me quicker than anything else."

"As you wish." It did, of course, as Spock refused to let the human bathe himself and he left not even a centimeter of flesh untouched. Spock also 'put on a show', as McCoy called it, for him, heavily soaping his own semi-erect penis, fingers playing over the double ridges at the head. He moved his hands up to his chest, pulled at the nipples for a second before turning profile and running a hand between the cheeks of his buttocks to plunge a soapy finger inside himself. McCoy was an admitted voyeur, and Spock had learned to appreciate the deviation as well.... By the time they were finished, McCoy's erection was again stiff with anticipation.

"Yes Leonard, that is what I want to see." He pointedly grabbed the human's body and pulled it roughly against him. "And feel."

Back in bed, Spock sucked him almost roughly until the human turned to reciprocate. Spock allowed a tiny sigh of pleasure as the experienced mouth captured his penis, allowing a small amount of pre-ejaculate to

escape, knowing how much the human claimed to savor the taste. Yes, all would be as perfect as he could possibly make it. But he did not wish to be brought to orgasm in this fashion, not this last night. He pulled away and turned on the bed.

"Please, use your strength, your desire. Fuck me, Leonard," he breathed. That vernacular had once caused him considerable distress, but it was another thing the doctor had taught him. With sex and mutual pleasure among humans, there were definitely times when it was more than proper to be crude. The in-drawn breath through clenched teeth expressed more clearly than words that this was one of those times. McCoy practically dived for the nightstand, grabbing the tube of lubricant resting there and hurriedly squeezing a generous amount over his fingers. Spock barely had time to rise to his hands and knees before he felt the fingers probing his body. They were quickly removed and Spock felt the human's thick erection nudging his anus.

McCoy buried his cock deep within Spock in one hard thrust, and the Vulcan acknowledged the delicious sting all the way to his fingertips and toes. "Yesss, more," he whispered, pushing back, feeling the weight of McCoy's testicles against his buttocks. The thrusts were slow but long, and they lasted an eternity, both much too long and much too short a time: another paradox. Spock could feel the ridge of the head at his sphincter one second, then plunging deeply into his body the next, over and over, as cool hands grasped and massaged the cheeks of his buttocks.

One hand snaked underneath him, milking his cock. He could feel blood pounding into it, lengthening it even further, stiffening it beyond possibility. Yes, this night would never be forgotten. Before McCoy could become frustrated, Spock allowed his body a second orgasm, moaning softly with the undeniable pleasure. As soon as he let himself relax, McCoy's hands were grasping his hips and he was thrusting desperately into Spock's warmth; the Vulcan could not recall a time when the human's need had seemed so fierce, so deliciously fiery. McCoy's orgasm was shattering, his body shivering with release as Spock felt semen shooting into him. But it was soundless, and that silence was disappointing, seemingly signalling a need unfulfilled.

McCoy pulled out after a moment and fell to the bed, his back to Spock. Spock sidled up against him and waited; something had happened, something had gone wrong. There was still tension in his friend, and there was no way that only two orgasms would have exhausted him. Spock felt and acknowledged the tiny shudders wracking McCoy's shoulders for at least thirty seconds before he realized their cause. The human was silently sobbing. A moment later he heard a harshly in-drawn breath, heard barely perceptible whimpers.

"Leonard?" he whispered, trying to turn the human to face him, but McCoy resisted the urgings.

*but in that
position, as McCoy
waits, I expect
against which
right side
buttocks*

"I'm sorry, Spock. Just give me a minute, and -- hold me, okay?" Spock did as he was told, resting his head on the dark silken hair, pressing tightly against the shaking back. After a few minutes, McCoy had regained some control.

"Spock?" he whispered.

"Yes?"

"It's over, isn't it?"

Spock stiffened in surprise. "Did the captain speak with you?"

"No." Another sniffle escaped. "You told me, tonight. I guess I figured it out in the shower." The shudders began again, faint echoes of tears Spock might have cried had he been anything but Vulcan. "You did everything I ever wanted you to do, like you were putting yourself through your paces for me," he managed to say through his tears, the voice muffled in the bedcover. "Ghod, you were so beautiful --" The shudders increased in their intensity and McCoy could no longer keep silent. The gentle sobs wracking him found his voice, and the sound -- of loss, of mourning -- wrenched at Spock's very private heart.

"I'll be all right in a minute, don't worry. I always knew there was an odd man out around here," he choked out.

Spock knew that the doctor did not want him to see the tears. Gently, he pushed until McCoy was flat on his stomach, face buried against the bed, then he began to rub out the harsh tension in the shivering back and shoulders. There was nothing he could say, no way to deny the truth of the fact that James Kirk, and not the doctor, was Spock's greater need, even though he did indeed feel a need for the gentle human under his hands. The emotion Spock held for McCoy was true and whole, but it was not the same. It could not be. To try to explain with words what each of them knew was both pointless and impossible. Instead, he continued to massage the human for a very long time, well after the shudders stopped and the breathing evened.

McCoy turned of his own accord, wiping at his nose and eyes, then took the Vulcan in a tight embrace. "Spock, stay with me tonight, but leave before I wake up in the morning. Okay?"

Spock studied the tear-streaked face carefully; it expressed sadness, but also acceptance. The doctor was calm now. "Are you sure?" he asked anyway.

"Yes. And you still can't tell him about us, not for awhile. He won't understand until he's completely secure with you." A pale ghost of a smile found its way to his face. "I won't give anything away. You know I want for you what you want for yourself. And I'm very glad that you let me

into your life while you waited. I'm glad I could teach you at least a little bit about love, and -- " his eyes swept down their bodies and his voice caught in his throat, " -- and other things."

"You taught me a very great deal, Leonard. Do not belittle that." Spock's gentle fingers traced a cheekbone. "I -- I love you; so gentle and violent, loving and strong, so mature yet childlike human that you are. My only regret is the pain I now bring you."

McCoy shook his head quickly. "We both knew this would happen eventually. Jim has always been slow about facing his feelings. Don't have any regrets, because I don't. And, Spock," a last tear glimmered in his eyes and slid down his cheek, "I love you, too."

The silence stretched on and on, until the human nestled his head in Spock's warm shoulder. The Vulcan held him close, feeling the body relax as sleep took the emotionally exhausted man. He remained for over five hours, memorizing the scents and sounds and tiny movements that were a Leonard McCoy few beings ever saw. When the body began to stir slightly in the ship's early morning, Spock got up and dressed quickly, leaned to plant a kiss on McCoy's temple, then quit the room.

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"Personal log, stardate 5837.0. I managed to avoid the captain for the twenty hours I required to heal the scratches Leonard made on my forearms. He suspects nothing. It is uncomfortable, beginning this so necessary relationship with hidden truths between us, but he will understand at a future time when I can explain fully.

"I have not seen McCoy; this is no surprise, as I surmised that he would bury himself in his work. His medical log shows that he has begun the quarterly crew physicals three weeks early, and by the time he reaches the captain or me, he will no doubt have learned to deal with the new situation.

"I intend to seek him out in perhaps three days, to speak with him in private. I cannot let him think for a moment that I do not support him in his pain." Spock sighed in frustration, a nasty habit that he was beginning to dislike intensely. But the pain, new to him as the feeling was, was harder for him to bear than he had expected. Remembering the doctor's comment about an 'odd man out', he wondered for a moment if that referred to the doctor or himself.

"I warned the captain not to discuss our relationship with the doctor. He thought I was embarrassed, and I allowed him to believe it so. In truth, I do not want Jim's joy washing over McCoy at this time, for I believe it would hurt him even more."

Spock looked around the warm haven of his quarters, trying to sort through feelings which were almost alien to him. His joy at Kirk's admittance into his life was a contradiction to the feelings for McCoy that did not and would not diminish. He knew he truly loved the healer. There must be something he could do, some logical way of dealing with.... But emotions weren't often logical. If there were no logical way to cope, he decided, perhaps in time he could find an emotional way.

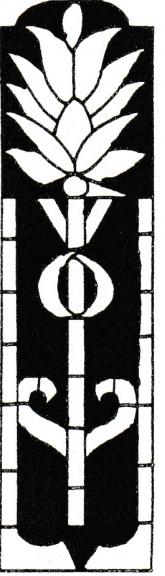
The solution most obvious, and also the most appealing, to simply maintain both relationships, was logical but unfair. He could not live a lie with James Kirk, and he sincerely doubted that his new mate would entertain the idea of polygamy. The captain could be extremely possessive.

"Soon, I will tell my captain all. With the obvious love he also feels for the human, he may be able to find the answer which at present eludes me. He may even surprise me and allow...." Spock stopped abruptly, thinking of the ecstasy/agony that emotions created, wondering if McCoy ever regretted introducing him to 'what love could drive a man to....'

"When my captain and my soul has become secure in this relationship, I will present him with my case for the doctor." He checked his mental clock and, to his further irritation, sighed again.

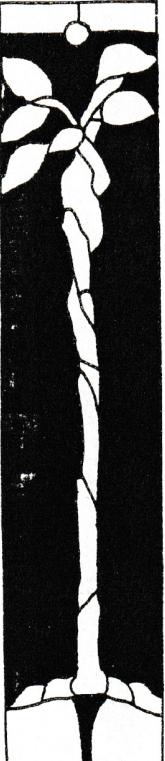
"Speculation is useless, and Jim will be here soon." A wash of joy swept over him, mixing with and temporarily overwhelming the pain.

"An answer will be found. And answer will be found for, as the doctor enjoys reminding me at every opportunity, 'love conquers all'. As a human, he may not have been aware of how rarely that actually occurs, but as the being I am, I will make it so."



REX

He walks the long corridors of the Lady ENTERPRISE
as if wide grass tufted savannahs grow beneath his feet.
Never a need to hide from man nor beast nor alien,
for nothing can threaten his world. Would they dare?
His power emanates from the heart of this ship herself.
He absorbs it as life giving nectar
returning love, trust and protection
to all he surveys as king of his realm.



ANNE FITZGIBBONS

VULCAN ICE

I called you ice-hearted Vulcan,
devoid of feeling,
only to break the thin crust of civilization
that held you close within its arms,
but I never meant to wound you so deeply
as your eyes expressed when that
barrier tumbled down.

You said nothing,
merely paused a fraction of one long second.
For you, several heart beats,
for me an hour or two.
your shoulders slumped
driving a blade through my soul with a
language I've always known.

Eyes soft as a Frethons',
voice caressing,
you laid open your heart before me.
You admitted the truth of my hurtful words.

"You've melted the ice and filled the void.
I have nothing more to offer."

I redeem myself.

"There is nothing more I desire."

-- ANNE FITZGIBBONS

COLLISION COURSE

Addison Reed

*Love is all we know of Heaven...
and all we need of Hell.*

"It is of no significance, Captain."

Precise and measured, bearing no more warmth than a dead star, the words fell heavily into the tense, contrived silence and spread discordant ripples over the ENTERPRISE bridge. Visibly bracing themselves, the wary crew waited helplessly for the angry torrent they sensed would follow.

"Ghoddamnit, Spock, it is of significance!" Kirk stood raging over the Vulcan seated statue-like at the Science station. "And when something happens to you that has an effect on the efficiency of this ship, I expect it reported to me... immediately!"

Endless minutes dragged into eons with only soft electronic clicks and beeps daring to break the utter stillness.

"Is that clear?"

"Clear, sir."

The storm that had threatened, then stalled, then threatened again

over the past week had finally struck -- gale force.

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The voyage should have been a calm one. The ENTERPRISE had just completed a succession of exacting assignments that had left her crew exhausted but proud of their accomplishments. Now, after a stop at Starbase 15 for repairs and welcome R&R, the famed heavy cruiser was on routine patrol near the Tholian Sector. Occasionally, 'Fleet took the option of making a show of force in that highly volatile area by committing such a starship to cruise its perimeters. It was even vaguely possible that the military hierarchy knew when a good ship and her crew deserved a little smooth sailing. But, for reasons that hadn't made themselves known, their sails now seemed to be set for troubled waters.

The soft but gruff voice of the very-observant ship's surgeon broke through the almost palpable strain that was reflected in the hollow-eyed, downcast faces. "Jim. Could I see you in Sickbay?"

Inflexible as a robot, Kirk followed defensively to the turbolift, which McCoy barely allowed to close before he attacked. "Now, would you please tell me what that little display was all about?"

"Yes. I'll tell you what it's about." The captain's voice was uncharacteristically abrupt. "It's about that medical report that was filed under my message code this morning. The one that's three days late. The one that says you've had my first officer on the Vulcan equivalent of tranquilizers for the past week."

McCoy held his explanation until they reached the privacy of his office. He'd seen all he wanted of public emotional displays for one day. "All right, Captain. It started when I insisted on doing a physical on Spock after he suddenly refused to go to that chess tournament that had been so all-fired important a couple of days before. When I did, I found he was exhibiting signs of stress. Rather severe symptoms in fact. Never seen that before in a Vulcan." The tone was baiting, accusing.

"What are you talking about, Bones? Missed what chess tournament? Spock wouldn't have missed that cerebral standoff for anything less than interstellar war."

"You really don't know, do you?" McCoy's astonished voice held a note of reproach. "You've been so wrapped up in your own little escapade and recovering from it that you haven't given anybody else a second thought since you beamed down to that hell-hole of a planet." Getting no perceptible reaction from his captain, he continued. "You haven't even bothered to find out that your loyal first officer -- your friend -- dropped out of sight as soon as you announced your intentions not to enter that tournament

with him. As soon as you decided you'd find a good lay for yourself instead...."

Kirk suddenly bolted from his chair, sending it crashing backward into the wall. "Stop it, Bones!" he shouted raggedly. Then his voice dropped to a defeated whisper as he added, "That's not the way it was. You don't know...."

"I know something's very wrong here, Jim. And I know that for the past week the two of you have been acting more and more like scalded cats and less and less like disciplined line officers. Wanna tell me why? Or do I tell you?"

Kirk turned away from him at the question, thereby preventing the doctor from seeing the obvious pain etched on the tanned, youthful face. Having missed it, McCoy kept up the gentle prodding. "Now, you've never told me exactly what sort of relationship you and Spock have had for the past few months, but I see the looks you give each other -- and I see that for some reason a normally well-coordinated Vulcan always has to steady himself with one hand on the back of the command chair...."

"Bones... it's a little more complicated than you think." The harsh, tortured reply was barely audible.

"Hell, I know it's complicated, although for the life of me I don't understand why it always has to be that way." His voice had grown sad, melancholy. "Spock was counting on you, Jim. You refused to join him in that chess meet, knowing what it meant to him." He paused to let his words gain purchase. "You let him down."

The muscular body stiffened noticeably under the heavy gold fabric. "I would have only been an embarrassment to him among all those intellectual, mathematically precise Vulcan masters. He only asked me because he thought he was obliged to...." His ramblings trailed off as he let his shoulders slump; his hands dropped listlessly into his lap, his mind again tormenting him with the distressful scene:

"Spock," he cooed, walking up to the desk in Spock's cabin and easing one hip onto a corner, "about our shore leave...." Smiling his most seductive smile, he smoothed the fine hairs of Spock's bare forearm, fairly bursting with the news of the secluded, forested lodge he'd found, the plans he'd made for them to spend a few precious days of solitude together. With time to explore the newness, the almost innocent wonder of their love for each other.

"Yes, Jim," he turned an openly adoring gaze on his chosen companion, nudging aside the shyness and uncertainty he still felt in that treasured presence. "I have been quite fortunate in obtaining the necessary accreditation to allow us to participate in the tournament." The prestigious event was an honor bestowed upon few Vulcans, and Kirk would be the first human

ever allowed to take part. Spock had bent nearly every rule in his book of logic to obtain his captain a place in the event. Now there remained but one obstacle; he must assist the effervescent human in controlling his amorous thoughts. To be distracted from his game when it was only the two of them alone in Kirk's cabin was one thing -- a distraction he had come to relish, in fact. But not only did he want his friend to enter this competition, he wished to see them emerge the champions -- as a team, for all the worlds to see. "As we discussed, it will be necessary for me to provide some instruction in mind control tech... niques...." He stammered as Kirk jumped to his feet, sending a flurry of papers to the floor.

"Fine. That's just fine," he turned his back to the stricken Vulcan, rejection and disappointment honing his words, "but don't let my undisciplined mind interfere. I'm sure you'll do much better without me in the way!"

Before Spock could stop him, before he could find his shattered voice, Kirk was through the door, the mute Vulcan's imploring outstretched arm unseen.

McCoy's voice penetrated the dull haze of his too-painful memories. "Did it never occur to you, Captain," he asked with real sympathy, "that he just might have wanted to show off his very special relationship with his very special human?"

Kirk shook his head solemnly, the soft hair falling across his forehead in disarray. "He would have been ashamed of me, Bones. He wanted to teach me how to shield my thoughts. It could only have been because he was afraid all those telepathic minds would see through me and he'd be... disgraced... by what we'd done... by what I'd done to him."

McCoy could hardly hear the last of Kirk's words and an ominous silence followed, giving him the disquieting feeling that he'd stumbled onto more than he had expected or was ready to deal with. "And just what have you done, Jim? What's eating the two of you that neither of you can face?"

The answer, when it came, echoed between them like a stone bouncing off the walls of an endless pit.

"I've been sleeping with him, Bones," he murmured with infinite sadness. "I've been sleeping with him, for gods' sake, and now he won't even talk to me unless we're on duty."

Having said far more than he'd intended to say, and unable to meet the searching blue eyes, Kirk bolted for the door.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk." Communications Officer Uhura's voice sounded over the intercom. Kirk kept going, head down, his breathing quick and shallow.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk! Come in, please Captain."

Reacting sluggishly to the hint of urgency in her tone, he turned on one heel back to the wall-com, activating it slowly with a closed fist.

"Kirk here." He studied the floor, willing his congested throat to clear.

"Captain, message from Starfleet, coming in Priority One and scrambled."

"I'll take it in my quarters," he droned mechanically. "Kirk out."

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CAPTAIN'S LOG, STARDATE 4314.11. I HAVE JUST RECEIVED ORDERS FROM STARFLEET COMMAND TO BREAK OFF ROUTINE PATROL AND PROCEED IMMEDIATELY TO THE PLANET HESTRIADES IV ON THE OUTER REACHES OF THE GALAXY. THE HESTRIADES ARE NOT MEMBERS OF THE FEDERATION BUT HAVE UNEXPECTEDLY ASKED FOR AND BEEN GRANTED ASSISTANCE BY THE FEDERATION. THE CAUSE FOR THIS REQUEST IS UNKNOWN AT THIS TIME.

"Mister Chekov, course to Hestriades IV?"

"Plotted, sir."

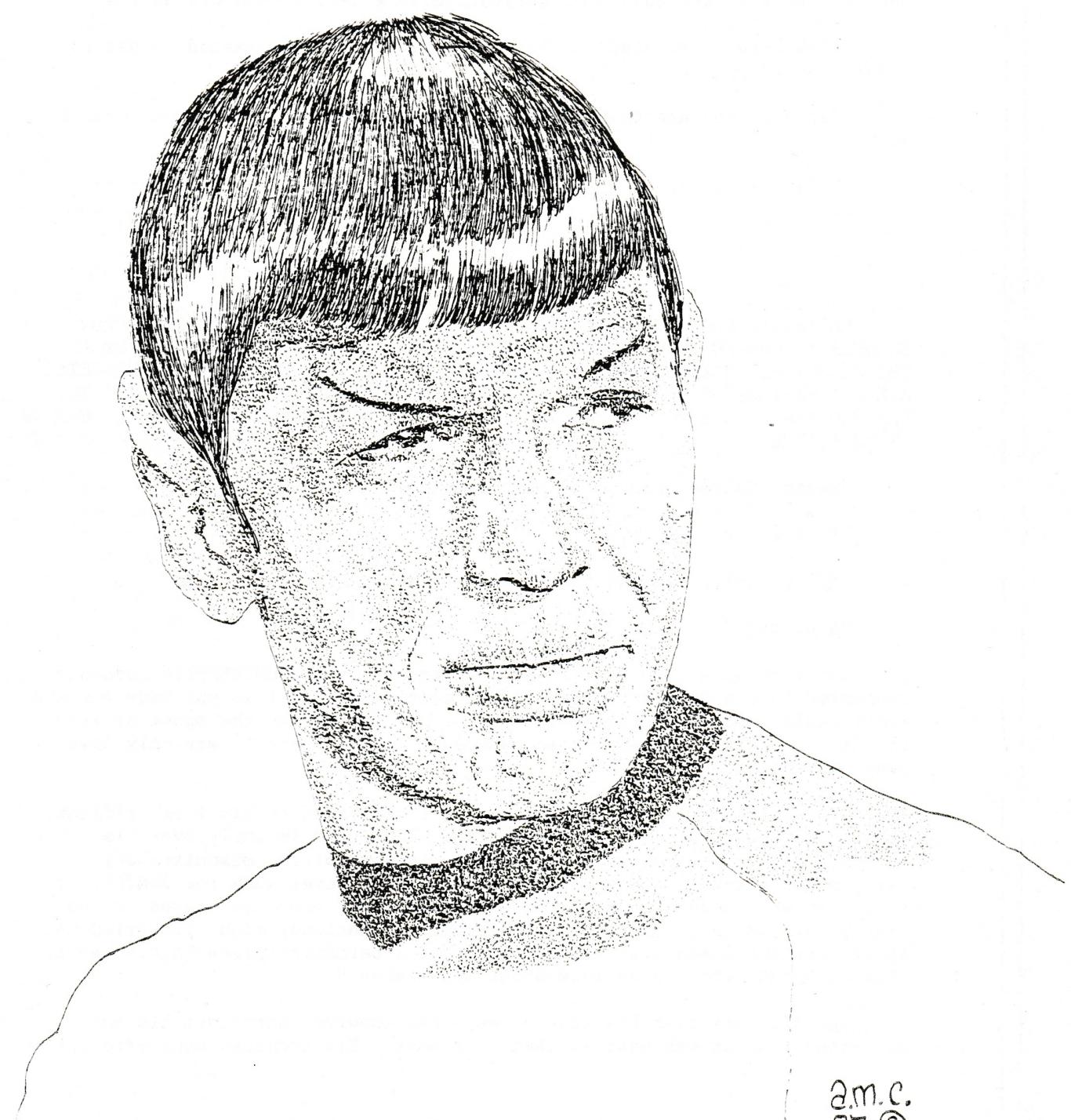
"Mister Sulu, take us there -- warp factor six."

"Aye, sir."

The vast sprawling star field that encircled the ENTERPRISE suddenly congealed into a fragmented rainbow of colors and light as she made a tight right-angle turn and entered warp speed. At many times the speed of light, the far side of the galaxy -- and whatever waited there -- was only days away.

Settling back in his command chair, Kirk turned to his first officer, pausing to study the straight spine, the head bowed intently over his screen. He could almost see the supple strength of the muscular back rippling in a ritual morning stretch. Would he never know the comfort of that simple innocent waking routine again? Never open sandy eyes to the sleepy half-smile.... He couldn't suppress an unsteady sigh, but tried to ignore the emptiness that had lately found a permanent place in his heart. "Mister Spock, what do we know about Hestriades?"

Spock's pose over his station may have appeared normal to his busy shipmates, but it was exactly that -- a pose. His troubled eyes were not



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focussed on the screen and he was not absorbing the data displayed there. Nor did the words of his commanding officer penetrate his intense preoccupation.

"MIster Spock!" Kirk spoke sharply for the second time. Spock gave himself no time to consider the raw pain he felt at the harsh tone in the once soothing voice -- the voice that had always seemed somehow softer, deeper, more resonant when directed at him. He roughly pushed aside that irrational thought just as he had hidden away the tumultuous feelings he had for his captain, and turned to face the center seat.

"Forgive me, Captain. Would you please repeat your question?"

Concern clouded Kirk's features as he again asked the details of their destination. In all the years he'd known this man, he could not recall ever having to repeat a question or an order. Even when he was fourteen decimals into an equation, Spock could respond to an interruption without breaking concentration. Have I done this? Is it because he's thinking of us that he's this distracted? Dear gods I hope so.... Spock, can't you see that I'm scared to death you've decided that Vulcan logic can't cope with human frailties after all? Rattled, he pulled himself back to reality, repeating the query.

"The planet is fourth in a solar system containing five planets, Captain. About two times the diameter of your Earth, and class M -- oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, but with a slightly higher oxygen concentration. It is the only inhabited planet in the system. Their culture is highly advanced," Spock recited automatically, "much on a parallel with your own. Our records indicate that they developed space flight capabilities more than two standard centuries ago but abruptly chose to isolate themselves, forbidding their own further space exploration. There has been no extra-atmospheric activity noted in one hundred fifty seven point two three solar years, Captain."

Kirk rubbed his chin. He couldn't escape the fact that Spock's voice held an even more controlled note than usual, and he couldn't continue to let it effect him as it had during their routine patrol. "Any Federation affiliation, Spock?"

"Negative. They have been contacted on several occasions by the Federation and while they have been amiable, they have not allowed the Federation access to the planet's surface, nor have they indicated any intentions to join either the UFP or any other galactic organization."

"An island unto themselves," Kirk said to no one in particular. That solitary thought unwittingly hurtled him back to the vision of the lonely, withdrawn science officer who had solemnly greeted him when he'd first taken command, and the warmth and subtle wit he'd found hidden beneath the cool exterior. A wave of pure self-loathing washed over him as he faced the fact that he might be the cause of Spock once again disappearing behind

that brittle shell. He deliberately shifted his errant thoughts back to business, directing his attention to the youthful Ensign at Chekov's navigation console. It was amazing how young these new trainees were lately. The Academy had recently begun the practice of assigning one or two cadets to a starship for in flight training before graduation. This fellow must already be pretty well advanced; usually Chekov was answering a continual stream of questions. This boy rarely looked up from his calculations.

Chekov had gone to check out some override controls when suddenly Kirk noticed a diode winking on the nav-console that should have been steady. "Ensign Berry!"

"Yes, sir?" Berry looked startled.

"Your panel is trying to tell you something, Mister Berry." Kirk restrained himself from barking an order. After all, the light indicated only that a minor course correction was necessary. Spock's eyebrow indicated that he had also noticed the deviation.

"Yes, sir. I was just about to make the correction, sir."

Slightly relieved at Spock's familiar expression, trying futilely to make sense of the emotional roller-coaster, Kirk ventured a conspiratorial grin. The half-smile dissolved when the anticipated look of concealed Vulcan amusement failed to surface.

"Problem, Keptain?" Chekov's Russian accent revealed his embarrassment that his protege had apparently been caught in error. The stern look on the first officer's face heightened his discomfort.

No. No problem. I've just managed to destroy several years worth of trust and friendship... not to mention turn my back on the only person I've ever truly loved -- who's ever really loved me in return. His nerves screaming for relief, Kirk dragged himself back to answer the intended question. "Nothing drastic, Mister Chekov, but I believe you should make clear to Mister Berry that anything he doesn't understand he should report."

Berry wanted to disappear. He'd been trying to remember the sequence in which to make the course correction when the captain had interrupted him. He'd been through all the required training on this console and he didn't like the idea of anyone thinking he might have missed something. He said nothing as Lieutenant Chekov again went over the procedure.

"Planet within sensor range, Captain." Spock looked up from his console, black eyes revealing nothing.

"Try contacting them, Uhura."

"Communications established with their Chief Security Liaison, sir.

On visual." Uhura's announcement was punctuated by the usual hums and musical tones that accompanied the computer enhanced transmission.

"Greetings, Hestriades." Protocol was standard now. "This is Captain James T. Kirk, Starfleet, United Federation of Planets, commanding the United Starship ENTERPRISE."

"And our greetings to you, Captain. I am Commodore Ttoors, in charge of security for the planet Hestriades IV. I appreciate your prompt arrival. I have a grave problem to discuss with you."

Ttoors stood wasp-waisted and tall. At well over two meters in height, he was much more slender than the Vulcan who stood just behind the command chair. The long three-sectioned arms protruding from his straight one-piece garment were milky white, slightly transparent. Kirk could detect the shadow of bone structure beneath the surface. He controlled an involuntary shudder of revulsion.

"We are here to assist you in any way that we can, Commodore Ttoors. My advisory party and I will beam down to discuss your difficulties and determine how the Federation may be of service. If you will give my transporter chief your coordinates...."

"No, Captain. I'm sorry, but that will not be possible. Our self-isolation rule forbids it."

"Then we'll beam you aboard the ENTERPRISE -- I assure you that your privacy will be respected, Commodore."

"That, too, is forbidden. Our communication will of necessity be electronic in nature, Captain. If you wish time to prepare for such a meeting, I will allow it."

Kirk turned habitually to the Vulcan he knew instinctively was at his right shoulder and queried him wordlessly. There was an unaccustomed coldness in the nod of acceptance and Kirk felt himself stiffen in response.

A discussion with the principals divided by many miles was often not as successful as one face to face, but Kirk had no choice, and he was anxious to find out the reason for diverting a starship to what appeared to be a peaceful, non-allied planet.

As the ENTERPRISE established orbit 7,000 kilometers above Hestriades, the advisory group filed into the briefing room. Not knowing the nature of the assistance needed by the inhabitants of the pale marble-cream sphere rotating below them, Kirk had assembled all whose expertise might be helpful. Chief Engineer Scott, mumbling some Scottish oath about a brief but unexplained overload on his engines, took a seat. He was followed by Chief Medical Officer McCoy and First Officer/Science Officer Spock who took his accustomed chair next to the captain, but failed to meet his eyes.

Lieutenant Chekov had also been asked to serve on the five-man panel, leaving Berry on his own.

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Ensign Berry looked quickly over his shoulder to see if anyone on the Bridge was watching him. Half the warning lights on the navigational console had unexpectedly flared into life in front of him. Momentarily stunned, he tried to remember the exact move to make next, when -- as suddenly -- they winked off.

He looked around again. No. No one else had seen. The Science station was vacant and Uhura was busy establishing the communications relays necessary for the meeting with the Hestriad Commodore. Sulu was in the command chair, but had turned to answer a question from Uhura. Berry's heart thudded. What was that? Malfunctions? Had he keyed the wrong control? He should report to Chekov -- but he'd interrupt the meeting and it was probably an error on his part. It was over. No harm done. Everything was back to normal and the ship's computer didn't print out data on such anomalies unless an alert was triggered; it would be lost in the mountains of information in the storage banks.

Berry settled back in his seat as Sulu turned toward him. "Maintain standard orbit, Mister Berry."

"Maintaining, sir. No problems."

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The holographic image of the emaciated, incongruously cherry-cheeked Hestriad made it seem as though he were present in the briefing room. Kirk found himself inexplicably glad it was only a visual transmission. Formalities had been dutifully attended to and Ttoors had risen to present his request. Something abruptly distracted Kirk's attention from the image -- a subtle change in the ship's attitude? He looked at his fellow officers... no looks of concern. He reluctantly pulled his eyes back to the fragile, sickly-looking visitor.

"It is the formal request of the rulers of the Hestriad Domain that I present to you. As I have explained, it is forbidden by our law that any citizen of Hestriades travel beyond the inner atmosphere of this planet. We have reason to believe that a rebellious group within our society has violated this order. There is evidence that the group, who call themselves the 'Skee', has developed a small fleet of ships capable of interstellar travel. Reconnaissance tells us that some of these ships are now apparently unaccounted for. We must assume that they have escaped this solar system.

Since for us to seek them out would be a violation of our own directive, we are asking the assistance of the United Federation of Planets in returning these ships to us -- or destroying them."

Destroying them? Kirk resisted the urge to jump to his feet in protest. What did this -- this Commodore Toors think the Federation was? What did they think he was, an executioner? He looked to Spock and saw the same resistance and incredulity reflected in the dark eyes. As they exchanged glances, he thought he saw a brief flicker of something else there, too, but it was gone before he could give it a name.

After the Hestriad was allowed to complete the presentation of his plea, he was excused from the meeting while his request was parried by the ENTERPRISE panel.

"There's one certainty here, gentlemen," Kirk began as he paced, hands clasped behind his back, "we won't be executioners for these people -- especially when we don't even know why they have placed themselves under this self-imposed exile. I'm not sure we should even try to return the renegades. What value is man's life if he can't explore, look for new challenges in the stars -- 'break the surly bonds of earth...?'?"

McCoy broke into what he recognized as the beginnings of a Kirk tirade. "Maybe they lie it that way, Captain," he drawled. "Maybe they like the feeling of belonging somewhere, being committed to something that they can't just tear away from at a moment's notice."

James Kirk rubbed his palm with his fingers and studied the deck for a moment. He tried to ignore the implication of the words echoing in his ears. *The feeling of belonging somewhere... to someone.... Have I lost that forever? Am I so afraid of giving myself to someone that I've purposefully destroyed that chance?* He wrenched himself disjointedly back to the business at hand and turned to Spock.

"Mister Spock, presuming these people do have ships with star flight capability, how are they leaving the planet without being detected? Talk to me, Spock. Don't give me a formal lecture. Talk to me. Please.

"Unknown, Captain. I have been studying the scanning devices in use on Hestriades. They are sophisticated, they are numerous and they are equipped with a respectable fail-safe system. Their technology has, in fact, concentrated on the establishment of an impenetrable detection screen around their world. The probabilities of a ship leaving its confines undetected are seven...."

"Never mind, Mister Spock," he snapped. "Let's just say it's virtually impossible -- but it is happening." Why am I so short with him? The rest of the group squirmed collectively in their seats at the outburst.

"We'll take on the task, gentlemen, unless you have objections, with

the provision that the Skee ships, if found, will be returned for disciplinary action. No direct contact will be necessary. But no Skee ships are to be destroyed unless we are under direct attack. And, of course," he forced a grin to play at the corners of his mouth, "no death sentences will be carried out." He noted the knowing smiles from his crew, all of whom understood and shared a thirst for adventure. But the usual indulgent remark or shy, intimate look from Spock that would have said he understood, that he shared Kirk's sympathies, was painfully absent. "Priority one:" he added, "we've got to find out how they're getting out of there -- if they are. Let's get to it."

The ENTERPRISE swung gracefully out of orbit and into an outward moving spiral -- all sensors at extreme range -- searching the vastness for any ships that may have violated the isolation code.

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Weary of both the fruitless search and his own inner vacillations, Kirk somewhat arbitrarily accepted McCoy's offer of a cup of coffee -- and a few minutes off the bridge. He settled gratefully into a chair opposite the doctor's printout strewn desk and let his eyes come to rest on the collection of half-full disposable coffee cups. That diversion allowed him to avoid the knowing gaze from the man sprawled across from him, but he couldn't escape the concerned inquiry.

"You okay, Jim?"

Kirk took refuge in the dark, steaming liquid, cradling the cup in his not-too-steady hands, staring fixedly into its depths.

"Jim?" McCoy prompted. "Have you been able to settle.... No, I guess you haven't." He studied the dejected figure thoughtfully. "You need to straighten this out...."

"How am I supposed to straighten something out when I can't get anything but scientific data out of him?" Kirk got up jerkily, slopping coffee on his hand. He shook it viciously. "Why can't I get him to listen, Bones?"

"I'm only human. I make mistakes, do stupid things -- why can't he understand that? Doesn't he know people have misunderstandings sometimes?" he ranted. "Hasn't he ever had an argument before?"

McCoy was unnaturally silent as he regarded Kirk's defensive posture. "Once."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" he bristled in contention.

"Just what I said, Jim. Spock had an argument once. With Sarek. And it cut him off from everyone and everything he cared about for eighteen years."

Kirk's voice was a strangled cry, his face deadly pale as the terrible significance of McCoy's words hit him. "Oh, Spock... what have I done to you?"

Thinking the badly shaken captain was going to collapse, McCoy eased him by the shoulders into a chair where he buried his head in his hands and gasped convulsively for air, chest heaving.

"Relax, Jim. Breathe slow." He circled his hand reassuringly across the broad back. "Slow! You're hyperventilating. Nothing's happened that can't be fixed," he consoled, waiting for the breathing to normalize. "Get yourself together and go talk to him."

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Spock had hardly taken his head away from the hooded viewer since leaving orbit hours before.

After resuming the conn, Kirk had alternately fidgeted and stared numbly at his friend's back. He had quickly learned to cherish the warm, non-verbal response he always received in return when the sensitive Vulcan detected his mental caress. This time, for the third time in as many hours, there was no indication that Spock knew James Kirk was even on the bridge. The captain resumed his nervous tapping of the chair-arm console and his restless, annoyingly repetitive pattern of stretching, then leaning forward, elbows on his knees. Trying with little success to concern himself only with the workings of the ship and the fruitless search for Skee, he purposefully abandoned the uncomfortable chair and walked toward the Science station. His throat tightened with fear as he approached and he felt his stomach constrict painfully as he drew nearer. Whatever he was going to do or say had to be right. He had to somehow make Spock understand that he had not abandoned him, that he loved him, that he wouldn't allow him to return to that wasteland of despair where he had spent so many lonely years. There was too much at stake. Everything. He knew he'd never get Spock off the bridge for a discussion, so he took his only other option, direct and simple. Glancing apprehensively around at his crew -- he wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible to spare his friend any embarrassment -- he took a deep unsteady breath and stifled the urge to clear his throat.

"Spock...." It sounded raspy, and louder than he'd hoped. He looked around guiltily, then took the chair next to Spock's, tilting his head to meet the dark averted eyes. He leaned forward, easing a clammy palm under

Spock's warm, dry fingers, closing his other hand over them gently.

"Spock," he repeated, then very softly, "I'm sorry...." He felt the spasmodic flinch of Spock's muscles, the pull against his grasp. "Please, let's try to...." Suddenly the long hand jerked violently away as Spock leaped clumsily to his feet.

The cold steel of his voice cut through Kirk like a blade. "Request permission to leave the bridge, sir. I must check the auxiliary control scanners."

"Spock...." Kirk pleaded in a strained whisper.

Spock didn't reply, but stood at attention, staring past the captain, eyes fixed on some unseen point. Compelled to explain the turmoil raging inside him, but with no idea where to begin, Spock succumbed to the hopelessness of it. The chess tournament did not matter. Kirk mattered. But he did not know how to tell the human... and he felt the schism widen.

"Permission granted."

Kirk's own eyes were unfocused, burning, as he slogged back to the center seat and dropped wearily into its unyielding cushions. He fought desperately to hold back the scalding tears that demanded release. For the first time since he was eight years old, Captain James T. Kirk wanted to cry; wanted nothing more than to slump in the command chair and bawl like a baby.

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On the Vulcan's return, Kirk allowed his first officer a half hour at his station, then broke the silence. "Spock, report." It came out more demanding than he intended.

"Nothing, Captain," came the precise reply. "We have detected no vessels and I can find no break in the scanning pattern of the planet. Not even a minuscule object should be able to escape that world."

"What you're saying, Spock," McCoy entered the scene, "is that not even a mosquito could get past that sensor net."

"Doctor, I see no logical reason to assume that detection of such an insect would be necessary by sophisticated scanners, as it could not survive flight above the lower atmosphere."

Kirk felt an unreasonable surge of jealousy at the effortless exchange between the two men. Why was it so easy to behave as normal with McCoy and not with him? He kept his voice level with an exaggerated effort. "Keep

checking, Spock. We're not even sure that there are any ships. Maybe the Skee don't even exist...."

Klaxons sounded suddenly -- surrounding the bridge crew with a cacophony of noise -- lights dimmed to red. RED ALERT! RED ALERT!

The captain was on his feet -- in command. "Mister Spock?"

"Sir, sensors have detected a very small target moving at incredible speed."

"A mosquito, Mister Spock?" McCoy managed above the din.

"Indeed not, Doctor. But perhaps -- a Skee. Its speed is warp eleven, Captain."

"Bearing 107 mark 8 -- and closing, sir."

"Phasers on ready, Mister Sulu."

"Sir, she's breaking away -- she's seen us."

"Speed, Mister Spock?"

"The object's speed is now warp 12.7 and increasing, sir."

Kirk didn't hesitate. "Sulu, go to warp 8."

"Warp 8, sir," Engineer Scott looked up warily from his console, "strains our engines and we canna hope to match warp twelve!"

"I know that Mister Scott, but this is the first chance we've had to look at a Skee -- if that's what this is. I want that ship kept in sensor range, Mister Scott." It was unmistakably an order.

"Still in sensor range, Captain."

"Scanners on full, Mister Spock -- can we get her on screen?"

"Negative, Captain. Distance is increasing."

Sulu turned suddenly. "Sir, she's changing course, bearing 239 mark 7. And she's slowing, sir. Warp 9. Warp 8.5. Warp 8, sir!" There was a momentary pause before Sulu spoke again.

"Sir! She's now at bearing 230 mark 6. Heading straight for Hestriades IV."

"That's it!" Kirk slammed the heel of his hand into the console. "Engineering, keep that power up -- give me all she's got. We've got to

see how that ship gets through their screens."

"Captain, they're down to warp 7.5; we are gaining on them."

"Good." Engrossed in the chase, Kirk allowed himself a wry smile. "See if we can pick them up on the screen. Full magnification -- let's see what this little fellow looks like."

The main screen flickered into odd diagonal patterns, then an indistinct shape appeared. "Too far away for detail, Captain, but she looks trim -- and she is fast!" Sulu could not control his admiration for anything that moved with the speed and precision of what they presumed to be the Skee ship.

The screen wavered again. "Uhura, magnification."

"They've vanished." Chekov looked stunned.

"Spock?"

"Quite correct, Captain. The ship has -- vanished. Sensors indicate nothing within scanning range."

"Sensor malfunction?"

"Negative, sir. All systems fully functional."

"Cloaking device?"

"It would not seem logical. Since we had their position when they vanished we should at least be able to detect a 'footprint' of some type denoting their passage. There is none."

"That's impossible! They can't just have disappeared without a trace. Mister Chekov, set up a course criss-crossing their line of travel. Mister Spock, I want those scanners checked again."

"Uhura, contact Commodore Ttoors." Edgy to begin with, Kirk was obviously disgusted with their failed attempt at overtaking their target. "Let's see what else he knows about this."

Kirk's conversation with the Hestriad security leader did nothing to improve his disposition. Ttoors confirmed the theory that the craft possessed by the Skee element of the population was small. He could not provide any clue as to how the ship had been able to disappear from the ENTERPRISE's sensors.

Further, the zig-zag continuous tracking pattern that Kirk had established was accomplishing nothing. It had gone on for longer than the Captain wanted to acknowledge -- with no results. Whoever, or whatever, had been

the object of their pursuit was as if it had never existed. He sighed. "Reduce speed to warp factor 2, Mister Sulu. Discontinue your present action and recommence spiral scanning pattern." The tone was one of defeat. They were back where they started.

Spock was scrolling through computer tapes for any known interstellar craft that might possess the characteristics of the ship they had followed. To an untrained observer, things would have seemed almost normal.

"Captain, considering the fragmented information we were able to obtain based on our brief scanning of the object, I find no record of any such vehicle in the galaxy. This cannot, however, be conclusive due to the extreme long range at which our sensors were operating at the time. Unless we can locate such a ship again, the information we have obtained so far will be ineffective."

It was just what the tired captain wanted to hear. "I understand, Mister Spock. That's why we're going to find another of our fast little friends."

Spock acknowledged with an uplifted brow that his superior did not give up easily, but was unprepared when Kirk answered him with a sly, impulsive wink. Unable to deal with the emotional response that gesture triggered in himself, Spock reacted the only way he could: his shoulders went rigid; steel walls clanged almost visibly into place, and a sterile coldness settled around him. Without such controls, he would do as his heart told him and sweep the inviting human unceremoniously into his arms. This he could not do. An entire lifetime of training forbade such behavior. His own reserved nature made it impossible for him... and there was more. He had failed Kirk miserably and must find some means of explaining himself if his selfish actions were ever to be understood and accepted. Perhaps his inability to handle fragile human feelings had already destroyed all such hopes. Perhaps Jim would be better off without him. In defense of his indecision, he turned tenaciously to his work, closing the troubled human off as though he had simply ceased to exist.

For a long agonizing moment Kirk stared at the back of Spock's chair and at the sleek black head. Mentally wandering, he recalled the first time he'd cradled that head on his shoulder, felt the silken strands fall through his fingers. It had all happened so easily, so naturally, that neither man had been aware of what was happening to them until they were wrapped closely in each other's arms. He felt tears sting at the back of his eyes again and tried to reach out with the tender fiber of the link that he had sensed woven between them since.... The tendril searched and trembled, but failed to penetrate the icy wall of rejection.

Intellectually shaking himself, dragging himself away from the loneliness that Spock's resistance had dredged up from the murky depths of his soul, Kirk swiveled awkwardly to the communications officer and spoke with a determination he did not feel.

"Uhura, open all ships' channels." He absently surveyed the bridge, gaining control of his thoughts. "We have been in pursuit of an alien vessel which suddenly escaped all our detection systems. It may still be out there and there is sure to be a clue somewhere as to its exact location. I want every abnormality in any ship's functions, no matter how small, reported to the bridge immediately. We will determine any significance here. Kirk out." He had the nagging feeling that they were missing something that was right under their noses and he had to concentrate on that fact, but the relentless undercurrent of dread that he had squandered something very precious kept lapping at his resolve.

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Ensign Morgan Berry had been laying crumpled in his bunk staring at the ceiling when the captain's message came over the shipwide com system. He'd tried unsuccessfully to concentrate on reading some library tapes. Even the music he was now playing in the small cabin hadn't distracted him from the guilt gnawing at his subconscious. He knew he should have reported the barrage of warning lights on the nav-console when he'd seen them. But everyone was busy then -- there was really nobody there to report to, was there?

Of course. There always was.

Chekov should have been told when he'd reported back to the console. But he'd have wanted to know why Berry had delayed. The ship wasn't in any trouble, was it? It didn't really matter, did it?

It mattered.

And now the captain had given a ship-wide order to report any abnormalities, no matter how small. But that was now... what he'd seen had been hours ago. It was too late for it to make any difference now. It would only get him a reprimand for failing to report it on his watch. Maybe he hadn't really seen it at all.

He had.

With reluctance, Berry rose from his bunk to prepare for his next turn as navigator.

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The bridge was quiet. Too quiet. It gave James Kirk time to think, time to feel the heavy weight of loss settle around him. And time to

remember how he had spent his rare off-duty time. Had he really thought he was doing what was best for Spock by refusing the tournament, or was he only trying to establish his dominance in their tender new relationship? It was not a question he wanted to examine too closely.

It was true that he was uncomfortable with the thought of being under the scrutiny of that many skeptical Vulcans, but it was an even more inescapable truth that he simply expected Spock to acquiesce, expected him to unconditionally set aside his own wishes and enjoy the sun and quiet that Kirk preferred. He should have seen that his usually malleable friend's near insistence on the chess games raised the stakes to a dangerous high. Expressing his own needs and desires was something Kirk could only remember Spock doing twice before; once risking his own life to save Christopher Pike and once risking both his father's life and his mother's rejection to save that which James Kirk held most dear, his ship. Finally he had dared ask something for himself. So small a thing to ask of a friend. "Come with me, share this simple pleasure with me." The silent plea haunted Kirk, words plainly said but never spoken: "Be here for me."

Spock had always been willing to follow, to go where Kirk wanted, to do the things the human enjoyed, never arguing, never complaining. Just being there for him. Always caring, always supportive, and finally, in his own quiet, undemanding way... loving him.

Pinching the bridge of his nose to try to quell the burning in his eyes, Kirk realized how brutally selfish he had been to go off in his own direction, expecting Spock to come along, dragging his tail behind him. And it hadn't worked this time. Spock hadn't come. Instead, he had locked himself inside that cold, musty prison of his mind -- the lonely prison to which Kirk had thoughtlessly thrown away the key.

He'd had his way, and they were the longest, loneliest, most frustrating three days he'd ever endured. It reminded him of a time in his childhood when the teacher had announced that the best-behaved child for the week would get an extra half-hour recess. Never one to back down from a challenge, even then, he'd won hands down. He remembered clearly wandering the playground alone during his 'prize' recess. He had never felt so alone, so outcast. Often he'd wondered if the teacher had really thought she was rewarding him or if she'd been trying to teach him the value of friendship, of sharing. Apparently, he hadn't learned very well after all.

No. Quiet was no longer his friend. The only time quiet had ever been his friend was when Spock was at his side to share it. Without Spock, he was that lonely little boy shuffling aimlessly through a deserted playground.

The inactivity also gave him the uneasy feeling that he should be taking some decisive action instead of playing this waiting game. Ensign Berry's arrival on the bridge interrupted his comparisons and dragged him back to reality.

"Ensign, I understand you've had no problems during your previous watches -- keep up the good work."

"Thank you, sir. I'll try." It didn't help the youth's mood of desolation to have the legendary Captain James T. Kirk personally commend him for his work.

As he slid over to let the trainee take the instruments, Chekov ordered, "Take over, Mister Berry. Nothing new to report. Bearing is 400 mark 2. Continue spiraling maneuver." Then he added, "This may get monotonous, this is the same grid we were scanning on your last watch, but so far there's...."

Without warning, the deck of Starfleet's most powerful heavy cruiser abruptly and violently sideslipped and dropped sickeningly from beneath her startled occupants. Plummeling out of control, the great ship twisted wrenchingly to port, her stressed metal skin splitting and peeling in denial of the furious turbulence.

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Space.

Limitless empty blackness. An unending void pierced only by cold, distant pinpoints of light. Vast infinite sameness. Dead stillness. No movement.

Except....

Twisting, spinning, diving, flashing through the inky void like an arrow gone berserk. Faster than light -- hundreds of times faster than light, the tiny, sleek, elegantly graceful ship exploded into the vacuum of space... they were free. Engines flared, hurtling them screaming into the emptiness. Free!

Not emptiness. Always there had been emptiness, the universe opening before them, luring them with its clear, glittering expanse.

This time was different. Something loomed ahead, directly in their path; huge, gleaming. A glimpse of massive saucer, tubular shapes, winking lights....

Moving fast. But not fast enough.

Retro thrusters keening in protest, the compact needle-shaped craft swerved, pivoted, looped almost inside itself in a desperate effort to avoid the immense, terrifying hulk of the warp-driven starship.

*in warp Enterprise
planetary system*

But not soon enough.

The sharp, ~~last~~-smooth forward edge of the lance-like wing struck the port support pylon of the USS ENTERPRISE at a combined collision speed in excess of warp 14, slicing through the tritanium shell as effortlessly as though it were paper.

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No stabilizers could compensate in time to prevent the unprepared crew from being tossed like scattered toys to fall painfully to the deck and into bulkheads. Collision alarms were superfluous, but continued to wail, reverberating throughout the ship as she began to slowly right her unwieldy bulk and artificial gravity again asserted itself. Some crewmembers picked themselves up. Some could not.

Kirk struggled to rise, but found himself pinned face-down to the deck by the exaggerated G-forces created by the out-of-control tumbling and damaged gyros. Straining to lift his impossibly heavy head, he searched the clutter, not daring to hope or to breathe. Spock?

Fighting the excess weight of his own body, the first officer had managed to pull himself into a sitting position on the floor, eyes darting wildly around the ravaged bridge. At last he found what he was so frantically seeking; Kirk, dragging himself laboriously toward the Vulcan, ignoring the warped grid tearing at his clothes, conscious only of his goal.

Unable to claw his way any further against the pressure, he reached out, resting his outstretched hand on Spock's extended thigh, needing desperately to feel the warmth, the throbbing life forces coursing steadily beneath his fingers.

Exhausted from the brief exertion and from overwhelming relief, he let his head drop, his cheek pressed tightly into the rough decking, his hand refusing to relinquish its hold on that vital comfort. He could deal with rejection later, now he craved the reassurance of touch. As he tried to re~~gain~~ his equilibrium, evaluate his crippled ship's overlapping alarms, he felt strong but hesitant fingers curve cautiously around his own.

Both men found themselves released with dizzying suddenness from the pounding gravity, responding instantly to the demands of the dying ship. The lithe Vulcan was on his feet in less than a heartbeat, diving expertly for manual controls.

"What the bloody devil was that, Captain?" Scott had been thrown around before, but would hardly have expected to survive the power of a collision at warp speed. Such occurrences were virtually undocumented and

were regarded with respectful awe by starfarers the galaxy over.

"Collision, Scotty. Get me a damage report on the double!" Kirk hauled himself to the command chair. "Warp engines to emergency shutdown! Full impulse power to stabilizers! All watches report to duty stations -- alert condition 3."

Uhura's communications console looked like a combination of Christmas and the Fourth of July. "Damage reports, Captain...."

She was interrupted by Scott. "Sir, somethin's hit us in the port pylon -- must ha' joost glanced off us -- ah don't know the nature of the damage yet. But ah had me men in that area, sir, checkin' out the primary controls." The Scot's face was grim. "They hav'na reported."

Kirk's mind was whirling. "Sickbay, get a trauma team to area 7, port pylon, environmental suits. Scotty, get in there and get me a damage report on the strut. Keep us on impulse power until we find out if that nacelle's going to hold."

Uhura faced the captain. "Damage reports from all decks indicate moderate damage, sir. All stations reporting injuries."

One of the first things that had registered with James Kirk was that his bridge crew was apparently uninjured -- and efficient as ever. "What hit us, Mister Spock? And why weren't our shields up?"

"What hit us, Captain, was a solid object, metallic in nature, most likely a vessel of some type. Why our shields were not fully activated is at present unknown. They had been partially activated at impact or the damage would have been much more severe. It is apparent that the sensors detected nothing until almost the exact moment of contact."

Kirk absently rubbed an elbow that he was suddenly acutely aware of. "Get me more information on that object, Spock. Manned?"

"Unknown at this point, sir. Scanning."

Scott's voice boomed in. "Sir, damage is severe to th' pylon -- Ah think she'll hold on impulse power unless we do somethin' really drastic. Structure is weakened. She took quite a blow."

"What about your men, Scotty?"

"McCoy here, Captain. We've got seventeen in Sickbay. Only three of them are critical. The ones who were nearest the damage area. They were lucky. What about you, Jim, any injuries up there?"

"No, Bones, nothing we can't live with." A pain shot through the captain's elbow in protest to his statement.

Spock whirled in his chair to face the captain. "Sir, our scanners have picked up the projectile. It is 2,000 kilometers distant at 210 mark 6 degrees. It was deflected there by the impact."

"Description, Spock?" An uneasy feeling in his gut told Kirk how close the ENTERPRISE had come to that same fate.

"It measures only 16 meters in length. Weight approximately 6 metric tons. There are matter-antimatter engines aboard but they are dead, Captain. She is adrift. Sensors indicate life forms aboard -- 3 apparently humanoid crew. Configuration would coincide with readings emitted by the inhabitants of Hestriades. There is no chance of establishing communications."

Kirk tried to muster a slight smile of satisfaction, but the grim reality of their own situation held it at bay. "So, at least we get to find out what the Skee have to say for themselves."

"You will have to do so with some haste, Captain. Their ship has suffered severe damage. Its outer hull has been breached and the inner hull alone is not of sufficient strength to remain intact in the vacuum of space. My estimate is that their inner hull will succumb to the pressure in 27 point 30 minutes -- no more than that."

"Then we've got to get them off that ship." And maybe in the process find out why they are violating their isolation directive -- and more importantly, why that directive was issued in the first place. Something about this had not felt right from the start; there were pieces missing. "Spock, what's the condition of the Skee crew?"

"Marginal, Captain. There appear to be some severe injuries."

"Someone mention injuries?" The turbolift doors whisked shut behind Doctor Leonard McCoy. "Just thought I'd better check out the command crew since things are under control in Sickbay. We've even managed to pick up most of the rubble you made of the lab with that 'little bump' you gave us."

"Sorry, Bones, I may have more work for you. We may have to bring aboard the other ship's crew and they appear to have serious injuries. You'll need your book of tricks on Hestriad physiology; I think we've found some of our escapees."

McCoy stepped into the center well and took hold of the back of the captain's chair. Spock loomed over them both, hands behind his back. "May I remind you, Captain," he asked, "that the Hestriad Code forbids direct contact between this planet's inhabitants and those of any other origin? Starfleet regulations permit no deviation from this code, nor is it open to interpretation."

McCoy opened up. "Spock, you regulation reciting data bank, those are people out there and they need our help!" Dismissing the Vulcan, he looked down. "I'll be in the Transporter Room if you need me, Jim."

"Nevertheless, Doctor, the regulations are specific."

"Spock," Kirk interceded gently. "Bones is right. We can't just turn our back~~son~~ on that crew and let them die."

"I am only attempting to follow the rules that have been set forth regarding this civilization." What had begun as a lecture softened into an almost anguished entreaty for understanding. "I do not wish to be the instrument of destruction for anyone."

Kirk was chastised, wounded, at the pain in the slightly broken words. Even now he was sometimes guilty of forgetting the vulnerable, caring, human half of the science officer. "I know you don't, Spock," he whispered tenderly.

It was the voice of a friend, not a commanding officer, the same quiet voice that had always assured him that he was accepted, wanted, and later... that he was loved. In it Spock heard the words, "I need you". Noble though his reasons were, resistance crumbled and he reached out tentatively, uncertainly, with the tattered remains of the eroded link and let it intensify. Touching the fragile golden whirlwind that was James Kirk, it hummed with astonished welcoming response, throbbing to life with the mingled essence of the dynamic men who shared it.

Afraid to chance a look at Spock that might break the newborn tie, Kirk concentrated on sending a reassuring wave of comfort and security along its path. There was no time for more. He inhaled raggedly and gripped both arms of the chair intensely. Only seconds had lapsed, but it was seconds that the imperiled Skee might not have to spare. "Perhaps there's a way to save them without breaking the code. Scotty, can we get a tractor beam on that ship?"

A beleaguered Scott answered from Engineering. "Aye, sir, she's at extreme range but I think we can do it."

"Mister Sulu reports it will take us 23 minutes to reach Hestriades IV at maximum impulse power. I don't want to risk engaging warp drive with the damage we have. That doesn't leave us a lot of time, so hook onto them, Scotty. Uhura, contact Commodore Ttoors and tell him we're bringing home one of his 'outlaw' ships and they'll need medical attention."

"Tractor beam on, sir," Scott reported from the Engine Room. "She's shaky at this range, but she'll hold."

Kirk loosened his grip on the armrests and turned to Chekov. "Plot a course directly to Hestriades, Mister Chekov." He'd started to give the

command to the new ensign directly, but thought he looked a little dazed. Maybe he hit his head, Kirk speculated, but it's possible this is just all more than he can cope with. That's what the training was for, to see if a cadet could take it or not.

Actually, Berry looked dazed because his mind was replaying Mister Chekov's nav-log entry stating that a millisecond prior to the collision, most of the indicator lights on the navigation console had been activated for an instant.

Chekov reported his findings to the captain.

"And there is no chance that the ship's presence is what activated the indicators, Mister Chekov?" Spock asked.

"No, sir, Mister Spock. It was something else, like the navigational beams were funnelled together for a millisecond. I've never seen anything like it."

"Well," Kirk offered. "It could be a natural phenomena; check your log to see if we've passed that exact point in our previous sweeps. It seems unlikely if it's natural that we wouldn't have seen it before. If it was there before, we may have an important key as to how this Skee ship appeared before our sensors could even detect it."

The navigation trainee appeared paler to Kirk as he turned to answer the Science Officer's query.

"Captain?" Spock's attention was riveted to the rapid flow of information displayed at the Science station. "The force of our tractor beam is intensifying the stress on the Skee vessel. The inner hull cannot withstand the added pressure."

"How long will it hold, Spock? It'll take us another 17 minutes to reach the point where the Hestriades can recover her crew."

"I cannot predict the exact moment of collapse, Jim." Spock's lapse into calling his commanding officer by his given name sent a rush of warmth through the human. He had always seemed to caress that particular word as he spoke it. "But the ship's inner hull is rapidly reaching fatigue point. She will not last another 17 minutes."

"Then we have no choice. Mister Sulu, do you have their coordinates?"

"Yes, sir, and Transporter Room reports ready."

"Sensors report hull failure is imminent."

"Transporter Room," Kirk's knuckles were white.

"Standing by, sir."

"Energize," he told the Transporter tech. "Uhura," he turned to the Communications station, "I want a security team to stay with those people just in case any of them have any ideas about wanting a bigger ship. And give us visual on their vessel."

The screen flicked its attention from the approaching yellow planet and for just an instant before it exploded into a million particles, the small alien ship appeared.

Sleek, in spite of its damage, tiny, built for speed alone, narrowly vee-shaped. Beautiful and graceful... now -- disintegrated.

"I'll be in Sickbay." Kirk turned a long, lingering gaze on Spock, then pushed himself from his seat and strode to the lift. His left arm nagged at him.

"Captain, I have Commodore Ttoors for you," Uhura stopped him. "He wants to know when the captives will be returned."

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James T. Kirk was not pleased with the conversation he had just concluded with the pale, thin Commodore Ttoors. Ttoors had been livid when it was explained to him that it had been necessary to bring the 'captives' aboard the ENTERPRISE. Even though Kirk had promised him there would be as little contact as possible between the ENTERPRISE crew and the injured Hestriades, the alien had kept repeating, "The damage is done. The damage is done."

Kirk had started again for Sickbay when his intercom buzzed. "Kirk here, Bones. I was on my way down."

"No, Captain." The doctor's tone was grim, uncompromising. "Nobody's coming down here." The bridge crew turned intently to their captain and his intercom. "I've got men dying down here, Jim."

"Bones, we knew the Skee crew was injured," Kirk soothed, "just do the best you can."

"The Skee crew isn't the problem," McCoy pronounced somberly. "Oh, they have injuries, but they'll recover. It's the 3 ENTERPRISE crew, Jim. They were doing fine, lacerations, some broken bones... now they're suffocating! I'm pumping oxygen into them. Their lungs are working, airways are open...." The doctor's voice rose an octave. "But they're choking for air and I can't do a damned thing to stop it!"

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CAPTAIN'S LOG, STARDATE 4462.9. THE SICKBAY SECTION OF THE ENTERPRISE HAS BEEN PLACED UNDER QUARANTINE BY ORDER OF CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER MCCOY. THREE MEMBERS OF MY ENGINEERING CREW ARE DEAD AS A RESULT OF OXYGEN DEPLETION, TWO MEMBERS OF THE TRAUMA TEAM HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY THE SAME SYMPTOMS. THEIR CONDITION IS GRAVE.

REGULATIONS WILL NOT ALLOW A SHIP IN QUARANTINE CLEARANCE TO DOCK AT A STARBASE. SO THE ENTERPRISE CONTINUES A SEARCH PATTERN IN ACCORDANCE WITH PREVIOUS ORDERS, NOW AT SUBLIGHT SPEED TO REDUCE STRESS ON OUR DAMAGED PORT PYLON.

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Captain James T. Kirk was waiting in McCoy's office again. It seemed a very long time since he was there last. What was it? Yes, couldn't sleep. Well, he thought ironically, I haven't had a chance to even think about sleeping in a couple of days so that's not a problem any longer.

Defeat was written all over the face of Leonard McCoy, M.D. "It's a losing battle, Jim. There's nothing I can do for them."

There were times when there was nothing anyone could say that would make any difference. Kirk rose and put his hands on his friend's shoulders, gripping firmly with whatever reassurance he could muster.

McCoy wearily recalled why he had summoned the captain to Sickbay. He hadn't slept himself since he could remember; had just come out of a decontamination suit for the first time in days. "These people have a parasite in their lungs, Jim," he explained. "When you and I breathe, our lungs exchange waste products -- carbon dioxide partly -- for oxygen. Then the oxygen is carried to the cells and more carbon dioxide is carried out. This parasite, whatever it is, is taking the oxygen and converting it to carbon dioxide before our bodies can make effective use of the oxygen."

"But if you know what's happening...."

McCoy sank dejectedly behind his desk. "That's what I do know. What I don't know is what to do to stop it. Nothing I've tried has any effect on the parasites."

"What about the Hestriades?" Kirk wondered. "I want to talk to them as soon as possible. We're still here to find out how they're getting off that planet. Are they ill?"

"No. They're not ill. I haven't checked them yet for the parasite because it wouldn't harm them. Their cells are nurtured by carbon dioxide, not by oxygen, so an absence of oxygen is normal for them."

"Then there's no reason why I can't talk to them."

"Jim, I just told you, they may have this bug but not be affected by it." He relented wearily. "I'll set them up in IIU's -- Individual Isolation Units -- then you can speak with them."

A frown crossed Kirk's face as he leaned on McCoy's cluttered desk.

"Jim, you don't look very well. How about getting some rest? I'll call you when the IIU's are set up. A few winks won't hurt you, and you aren't fooling me with that arm, either."

The doctor disappeared into Sickbay and Kirk sat down and dropped his head on his arms. He'd just rest for a minute.... The intercom whistled and jerked him to consciousness.

"Captain Kirk to bridge. Captain Kirk, report to the bridge, please." It was Uhura's relief. Well, everybody had to rest sometime. Except Spock. He'd been buried in Engineering round the clock since the accident.

"Kirk to bridge, I'm on my way."

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Sulu turned as the captain entered the bridge. "Sir, we detected another Skee ship."

"Good, Mister Sulu. Coordinates?" Sulu gave them to him. "Well behind us now, and we can't pursue him." He called Spock to the bridge for an evaluation. His drawn, almost haggard appearance worried Kirk but was probably undetectable to the rest of the crew.

"Yes, Captain, I was able to observe the contact. Our scanners indicated the presence of the Skee for point 72 microseconds, then registered nothing at all, then indicated the Skee ship moving away from us at a speed in excess of warp 10. Since our scanners are aimed directly in what would have to have been the path of the Skee, they should have recorded its presence uninterrupted from the time it was first detected. They did not do so."

Chekov had been turned toward the Vulcan. "Mister Spock, my indicators threw another fit at the same time the sensors recognized the ship for the first time."

Spock's right eyebrow soared. "A 'fit', Mister Chekov? Fascinating. I would expect there is a relationship between the two events. However, the navigation system is not designed to detect matter. That is left to the scanners. The navigation system would detect only abnormalities in the space-time continuum or in the proximity and configuration of any of the known points of reference. Please check your calibrations."

Kirk walked to Spock's Science station just as McCoy entered the bridge looking glum.

"I still can't understand, and our captives aren't telling us, how these ships are able to escape undetected with that web of sensors around them." Kirk was pacing but wasn't aware of it. "If these aberrations we're seeing have anything to do with it, the Hestriades should have detected them, too. They've got 'eyes' everywhere."

"Sounds like," McCoy mumbled to no one in particular, "the only way out of that place would be to dig a tunnel."

"Doctor," Spock seized the opportunity. "Such an assumption would be illogical at the least, since...."

Raising his right hand for silence, James Kirk pointed at his first officer. "Maybe not so illogical. What about a tunnel, Mister Spock?"

Spock's eyebrow reached its apex just below his trim hairline.

"Suppose," the captain was pacing again, gingerly massaging his elbow. "Suppose the Skee have some device which is somehow able to disrupt sensors in such a way as to create a tunnel effect -- a corridor -- through the patrolled area around Hestriades?"

Spock looked as animated as it was possible for a tired Vulcan to look and wheeled around to interrogate the computer regarding such possibilities.

McCoy had been waiting for the exchange to end; he realized how well Vulcan logic and the human perception of his captain meshed together. It had gotten them out of more than one tight spot, and he could only hope some part of it was still working for them in spite of their apparent personal collision course. But he could only add to this particular threat. "Jim, if there is a tunnel there, you'd better plug it up fast."

Kirk questioned him with a look.

"I've discovered this ^g source of the parasite."

"And...?" Sometimes Jim Kirk could become impatient with his CMO.

"And -- it's carried by the Hestriades. In fact it is essential that

they do carry it. It's a symbiotic relationship. The parasite must have the host Hestriad to live. But the Hestriad must also have the parasite in order to survive. It's their respiratory system, Jim. They can't directly convert oxygen into the carbon dioxide needed by their bodies. The parasite does it for them. Of course, in human bodies, the process is fatal because the cellular needs are just the opposite."

"What you're telling me then, Bones, is that if these people are allowed to travel to other populated areas they are going to infect everyone they come in contact with?"

"I believe that is what he said, Captain," Spock said. "I have correlated your theory of the existence of a corridor with the ship's computers. It is indeed possible to create such a diversion. However, according to the data I have assimilated, I believe it to be somewhat different in nature than what you interpolated. I believe that what has been created is an area, a image, which the scanners are made to record. What they are really seeing is something akin to a projected image of what actually lies on the hidden side of the corridor."

"I see," Kirk winced at the word he'd chosen. "Like mirrors, Spock?"

"Similar, Captain, although no matter is used to create the illusion. Matter would be detected."

"I propose we test your theory, Mister Spock. If we can't 'see' the side of the tunnel, we should be able to look into the entrance, should we not?"

"That would seem a logical assumption."

"Then," the captain of the ENTERPRISE whirled into action, "let's go. Mister Sulu, reverse course. Mister Chekov, take us back to that 'blind spot' our sensors experienced. My guess is that we received a brief sensor reading when we were even with the opening in the tunnel, lost it as we passed, then picked up the target again as it left the tunnel."

Impulse engines were capable of more than twentieth century man could have imagined, but James Kirk was sure that the ENTERPRISE was crawling toward the coordinates Chekov had supplied. The warp drive was operable -- at diminished capacity -- but there wasn't enough speed needed here to risk damage to the weakened support structure. Patience.

"Nearing coordinates, Captain," Chekov announced.

Spock had been coaxing the sensors to new limits as they approached the anticipated location of the 'corridor'. It paid off. "Captain, sensors indicate a turbulence near the tunnel coordinates. There is, in fact, a current of agitation which will force us outward from the tunnel's entrance. I suspect that this force is utilized to launch the Skee ships

at inflated speeds. We will need to counter its velocity with our own or we will be forced out and away from the planet."

"Very good, Mister Spock. Coordinate with Mister Sulu and keep us steady."

"Impulse engines should suffice," Spock said, anticipating the next question. "I believe we are now ready. We will enter the corridor in 5 point 8 seconds."

"Keep those engines steady, Mister Scott. Keep us parallel to the opening. I'd like to hold steady there and take a look if we can."

"Aye."

"Two seconds, Captain."

"One."

"Maneuvering thrusters."

"Zero -- contact."

The ENTERPRISE shuddered briefly, then steadied. They were stationary at the corridor's opening.

"Spock, I don't know how long we can hold her here; get all the data you can while we're where we can monitor. Scotty, warp engines on emergency stand-by. If one of those Skee ships is launched up this tunnel we're going to have to move, fast. Stand ready to alter course, Mister Sulu."

Without warning, the ENTERPRISE lurched forward. She was spiraling into the vortex!

"Scotty, reverse engines."

"They're rever^sed, Captain, but we're bein' pulled forward anyway. The force had inverted itself! It's like bein' caught in a vacuum tube. We can slow down the pull but we canna stop it with impulse power."

"Then give me warp drive, Scotty. Now."

"Sir, the pylon...." Scott's face was ashen.

"Now, Mister Scott." Kirk had to take the risk that the stress of warp drive would cause no more problem than their continuing spiral. The alternative was being pulled into the atmosphere and incinerated.

The tremendous surge of warp engines coming on line at emergency power throbbed through the ENTERPRISE. She shuddered again. She moved neither

forward nor back. Kirk could feel the unmistakable vibration of engines at full power. They did not move, but the effect had counteracted the spiraling action. "Report, Mister Spock."

"The force of the current has increased, Captain. We are operating our warp drive at full capacity and we are holding steady. That is the best that we can do."

"And the damaged pylon? What if it goes?"

"Then," Scotty piped in, "we'll go wi' it, cause when it goes we lose one warp drive unit and we canna hold off this force wi' only one engine. And, Jim, we're like a cork in a bottle; if that current reverses again, it'll blow us halfway across the galaxy!"

Kirk managed a wry smile for his excitable engineer. "Then it will be up to you, Mister Scott, to see that the cork stays in the bottle. That should be an interesting change of pace."

"Aye, sir." Scott looked meek.

The ENTERPRISE remained steady, though the decks shook like a frightened animal. She had been under full emergency power for almost two hours. Nerves were wearing thin -- especially those of Engineer Montgomery Scott. He knew he would have to instantly make corrections in power feed if there was a deviation in the treacherous, unpredictable energy flow.

Lieutenant Sulu had been in the same 'battle ready' position over the helm for so long he wondered if he could move if the need arose.

Kirk twisted an already abused stylus over and over in his fingers, suppressing an aching temptation to hover near his extremely overtaxed science officer. "Analysis, Mister Spock?"

Spock was severely pushed for time, attempting against indisputable odds to compute a way out of the maelstrom. "Since we are in the midst of the corridor, our sensors are able to gain certain data, but it is difficult as the same forces which create this passageway effect tend to confuse the sensors as well. I have been able to trace and pinpoint the source of the effect. I believe that our best chance would be to have the disruption field disconnected at its origin on the planet surface."

"Very well, we'll contact Mister Ttoors and ask for his assistance. He should be very pleased to put this corridor out of business. Uhura, contact Commodore Ttoors and put him on visual."

The Commodore's visage flickered into existence on the main viewscreen.

Kirk explained the ENTERPRISE's precarious situation to Commodore Ttoors. It seemed to him that the Hestriad took it all a bit too calmly.

And now he had asked for Ttoors' help.

"So you see, Commodore, since we've been able to locate it, if you could manage to disconnect the field at its source, you would not only release the ENTERPRISE, but you will have destroyed your rebels' access to the galaxy -- as you wished." Kirk settled back in the command chair. Now all they would have to do is wait.

"Captain Kirk." The Hestriad straightened himself to his full height. "I am afraid that I cannot do as you ask. To do so would be to destroy my own handiwork, so to speak." The hairs on Kirk's neck began to stand up as he continued to listen. "We intended you no harm, Captain. We did not even suspect that you would actually stumble into our little stairway to the stars. But you have -- and you are too big a prize to give up. It would take my people decades to construct a ship with the capabilities of the ENTERPRISE. We have only the Skee, fast and efficient, but inappropriate for so many uses."

Captain James Tiberius Kirk rose arrogantly to his feet. "You, Commodore? You intend to take my ship?" He fumed.

"Yes, Captain. Although it was not my original intention. You see, we Hestriades have had a plan for many years to move out -- into the stars -- to colonize. We would not have to begin on a barren, undeveloped world. We have an advantage, you see. All we would need to do is establish a few colonists on a planet where culture has been developed to our liking -- like your Earth -- and soon that would all be ours alone."

"You would depend on the parasites to do your dirty work for you, then?" Kirk was incredulous now, and angry. "Explain to me. If this was your plan, why did you call in the Federation to detect what was your own fleet and your own anti-detection system?"

"Quite frankly, Captain, we did not expect you to be so successful. But we knew that our activity could only go undetected for so long -- that the Federation would learn that we had broken our directive -- and why. If we had already called in the Federation to deter a small band of rebels, then their attention would be diverted away from our main colonization efforts long enough for us to complete our objective."

"A decoy."

"Exactly, Captain Kirk. And now your find starship will help us to accomplish our goal much sooner. Think of the colonists it can carry!"

"MY ship will not carry your death troops anywhere, Commodore."

"But, you see, you cannot escape. I will not risk damage to your vessel. Simply I will wait until your power is drained and you are drawn within orbital range. Then my people will come aboard for a -- visit, and

in a few days it will be over. I am a patient man."

"Patient." Kirk muttered, slamming the communications channel closed. "Insane! Is there any chance to contact Starfleet Command from here, Uhura, and brief them on these colonization plans?"

"No, Captain, no chance at all. There's too much interference. We've been completely cut off since we entered the tunnel. Not even a message buoy would be effective -- it would just be sucked into the atmosphere and burned up."

"I will not let them use this ship to distribute their disgusting brand of death all over the galaxy. There has to be a way out of this corridor." Kirk looked at all his people. It was a good command section. He looked at them for answers. They were silent.

Chekov glanced over at the weary ensign beside him. This had really been hard on him, Chekov thought.

Berry was thinking, too. He'd been thinking for the past couple of watches that he'd never be able to handle the responsibility of a command position. These were special people. But he wasn't a quitter either and had decided to request a transfer -- perhaps to the computer section. Now it looked very much as if he would not get that chance, but he knew their present predicament was due in part to the fact that he hadn't reported what he now realized was the ship's first pass over the mouth of the tunnel.

"Captain, sir. Permission to speak?"

"Speak up, Ensign. We need all the help we can get."

"I'm sorry, sir, but earlier, when we had just established surveillance, the navigation alarms all went berserk for a fraction of a second. I failed to report it, Captain."

"If you found it insignificant at the time, then why are you reporting it now, Mister Berry?"

"I felt it was my duty to report my error, sir. If I had mentioned it earlier we might not have been hit by that Skee ship...."

"Report noted and logged," Kirk sighed heavily. "Consider yourself reprimanded for failure to report abnormal instrument readings, Mister Berry."

"Yes, sir."

The frightened ensign was startled to feel his commander's sturdy hand close over his shoulder. "It'll be okay, son. We all make mistakes... but if we can learn something from them we're allowed to refer to them as

'experience'." He grinned, squeezing the trembling muscles, then sobered as his thoughts turned inward. "Where we make our real mistakes, Berry, is when we try to ignore them rather than deal with them." Leaving the confused young man, Kirk ignored the command seat and walked toward the lift. "You have the conn, Spock. Page me if anything develops."

McCoy had only been on the bridge long enough to explain the lifting of the quarantine and to hear the last exchange. He strode purposefully toward the Science station as Spock rose to assume command.

"Spock, I actually believe you look puzzled."

"I am simply attempting to discern the Captain's apparently condescending attitude toward an obvious breach of regulations, Doctor." He kept his voice low, out of the cadet's hearing.

"A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down...." McCoy stared thoughtfully at the lifted brow, the real concern Spock was allowing to show in his eyes, and relented. "Spock, what it boils down to is that sometimes we humans don't need lengthy dissertations and involved explanations or apologies, we just need somebody to give us a hug and tell us everything's going to be okay." Without another word, he disappeared into the lift, leaving Spock standing halfway to the center seat.

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There were no plainly visible stars outside the clearsteel windows of the observation port. Instead, a murky darkness prevailed. Not the deep clarity of space, but a dull confining grey, with only distant distorted blurs to indicate the suns and planets dancing beyond their tubular prison. It did nothing to dispel Kirk's growing feeling of uselessness to stare at them; yet he remained standing, his eyes locked on the gloom, the soles of his feet registering the discordant thrum of overworked unsynchronized engines.

A small sound drew his eyes to the doors and when he saw the lean hand on the security controls he recognized the muffled click for what it was -- the privacy latch. For reasons he couldn't grasp, he suddenly found it very difficult to breathe in the closed room; his mouth and throat were unaccountably dry, his heart pounding. Uncertainty swarmed in the pit of his stomach as he considered the possible implications of the unexpected intrusion; his eyes seeking refuge in the clouded stars. No more logic, Spock. No rationalizing on why we can't continue what we've had together... I can't handle it right now.

With awareness of muffled footsteps ushering his silent visitor into the room, a quiver crawled down his spine, daring him to look into the dark abyss of his future. There was a moment of acute silence and he knew the

familiar form was only inches behind his rigid back. Hands as firm as steel, as downy as velvet, closed on his shoulders, the lean palms pausing warmly before moving slowly down his taut arms. The dark fingers entwined with his own, folding his arms across his chest and pulling him tightly backward into a protective cocoon. The heat of the Vulcan breath ruffled his hair and he leaned gratefully into the embrace, feeling the loneliness shrink away into the shadowed corners of the room.

Sensing the tension drain gradually from the compact body, Spock slid his hands upward to turn Kirk firmly in his arms. A silence hung between them, the topaz eyes sweeping up to meet the darkly handsome face, to lose themselves in the fathomless depths gazing longingly from beneath sooty lashes. Loosening his burden only slightly, Spock reached up to brush back the silken waves.

Mesmerized by the soft, penetrating stare, Kirk mirrored the gesture, gently stroking the planes of the rugged cheek, mapping the rich contours as if to store their image safely away in some secret, hidden place. The smooth, fine mouth trembled vulnerably under the soft caress of his thumb and the room spun into welcome darkness as warm, pliant lips settled on his own, enveloping them both in a cresting wave of tenderness.

His eyes were still closed when Spock's sensitive fingertips grazed the nape of his neck, tangling the tight curls, drawing his head carefully down into the musky hollow of his throat, cradling him in powerful arms. He tasted the salty flavor of his own tears as the deep baritone vibrated against his cheek.

"Everything will be all right, Jim. Everything will be all right...."

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If the harried crew noticed the red-rimmed hazel eyes when Kirk and Spock burst into their midst, they didn't meet them. If they noticed the damp creases in the usually impeccable blue tunic, they ignored them as well.

But they couldn't ignore the captivating look that passed between the command team as Kirk took the center seat from the helmsman. "Thank you, Mister Sulu. And... thank you, Mister Spock."

They all saw the unmistakable flicker of a smile touch the dark eyes as Spock acknowledged with a nod and but a single word, "Captain." He turned to study the viewscreen, hands clasped behind his back.

"Spock," Kirk kept his eyes straight ahead. "We've been pulling both ends against the middle for a long time here."

"Indeed." The answer was quiet, thoughtful.

Kirk glanced sideways at him, smiling crookedly at the veiled meaning of the reply, but quickly grew serious, leaning forward and rubbing his chin. "We have a ship in real trouble... maybe we've been resisting too much."

"Yes, Captain. It is a theory I should like to expand upon."

"Expand...."

"An instantaneous shutdown of all power systems..."

"Yes."

"And an emergency restart?"

"Will cause the damaged pylon to sheer -- and take half the superstructure with it."

"Damage would likely be critical."

"Then... let's give it a little help."

Ensign Berry had been listening with rapt attention to the clipped, rapid exchange and wondered how either man could understand the incomplete sentences, but he'd never seen two men look more animated or determined. He glanced at Sulu who seemed to be enjoying the verbal shorthand immensely.

"Is this the way a starship is supposed to operate?" he ventured in awe. If it were, officers' training might be worth the struggle after all. To be like these two....

Sulu grinned, glancing over his shoulder at the most respected command team in the galaxy working their magic once again. He felt confidence rush through him at the familiarity of the scene. Then, realizing Berry was waiting for an answer, said proudly, "It's the way this starship is supposed to operate."

Kirk whacked the com button as Spock whirled toward the Science station.

"Scotty!"

"Aye?" There was uncertainty in the tone. The crusty engineer had learned to recognize when he was going to be expected to perform miracles.

"Can you rig something to explosively detach the port nacelle and support structure on my signal?"

"Sir?"

"Will it work?"

"Ah... think so, sir, but it'll take a wee bit a time."

"Would we have warp capability?"

"Aye, w' the proper rechanneling an' if we set up a chain a' relays to the intermix.... Ah might be able ta gi' ye warp 3. But, sir, there's more electronics packed inta that connectin' pylon than a pleasure house full a' androids. Disconnect that pylon without a priority reroute, Captain," he warned, "and ye'll red-line half the systems on this ship."

"Get to it, Scotty. We'll have to take that chance. Coordinate your detonation points with Mister Spock."

Only moments later the comline beeped, interrupting Kirk's own calculations for their escape attempt.

"Engineerin', Captain. This is Scott. Ah just channelled all the reserve power we had inta the starboard engine. No time ta detour systems. We only have an hour at the outside before we get sucked inta this thing!"

"That's the idea, Mister Scott. Can you have someone program that port drive until to blow when it reaches the atmosphere?"

"Oh, she'll blow all right, sir. What wi' all the vibrations from the structural damage, the flux chillers canna keep up -- she's just below goin' critical right now."

It was a long hour for James Kirk, who waited.

It was a short hour for Spock, Scotty and the hand-picked experts from Engineering who were setting up explosive relays to separate the powerful streamlined warp drive pod and support column from the floundering ship.

The first interruption of the wait was a frantic one from Scott. "Only a few more minutes -- that's all we have. Whatever Mister Spock's doin', he'd better do it verra fast!"

"Scotty, what are you talking about? Isn't Spock with you?"

"No, sir. He went up inta the pylon -- through the crawlspace -- to try an' reroute some a' the primary systems...."

Kirk was on his feet. "Then call him, get him out of there!"

"Sorry, sir, ah can't raise him on the communicator, his bein' so

close to the flux...."

"Sulu, take the conn! I'm going back there...."

Inside the lift he barked, "Number 7 Engineering section." The turbo balked and the computerized voice droned, "Turboshaft is inoperative at that level. Please give alternate destination."

"Shit!"

"Please repeat your destination."

When the turbo doors finally opened, Kirk tore down the corridor toward the access hatch. Just as he reached it, gasping for breath, a dark head appeared at the circular opening and the unruffled first officer climbed calmly out.

"Spock! We've only got a few minutes...." Kirk gasped breathlessly.

Without a word, Spock matched Kirk's headlong sprint down through the deserted bowels of the ship.

"Why didn't you tell me where you were going? You scared the hell out of me," Kirk huffed. "Am I going to have to put a bell on you, Mister Spock?"

They launched themselves around a rubble-filled corner as Spock gently shouted his reply. "Perhaps, Jim, a bond would provide the same security." Though he would never be able to justify making such an unsolicited remark at such an inopportune time, the resulting look on Kirk's face dispelled any doubt that it was correct. They swung onto an emergency access ladder and slid down to the lower deck.

"Spock! Is that a proposal?"

Pounding pell-mell for the lift, they never missed a step.

"Yes."

"Yes!" Kirk laughed, beaming like a rogue star gone nova. "Yes!"

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The control center of the Herculean starship was astir with leashed pandemonium.

"Everything ready, Mister Sulu?"

"All stations report ready, sir."

"All stations prepare for emergency power shutdown in 60 seconds. Mark."

Sulu's head snapped up as the ship lurched. "Sir! We've lost warp power!" He turned. "Forward motion at warp 2, Captain. Velocity increasing."

Kirk slammed the heel of his hand into the intercom. "Scotty! Cut all power -- now!"

"Forward velocity at warp 4 point 2. 32 seconds to burnout."

"Heat shields at maximum. Hull temperature increasing."

"Captain, registering 80% power loss on inertial stabilizers."

"Hold on...."

"Rapid fluctuation on main gyros."

"Automatic guidance to manual shutoff. Stand ready for port separation."

"All systems report ready, sir."

"Fire detonators."

"Detonators firing.... Sir! Lag in detonation sequence...."

"Explosive decompression -- maintenance shaft nine!"

"Blow pressure bulkheads."

"Sealed, sir. Detonation sequence re-established."

With a final muffled boom and a rending shriek of tearing metal, the nacelle shook itself loose and hurtled uncontrolled toward the planet below.

"Emergency separation completed."

The ship shuddered convulsively and skewed crazily.

"45 degrees yaw to port, Captain."

"Compensate!"

"Unable to comply. No response from manual guidance."

"Outer hull temperature approaching critical, Captain. 14 seconds to planet atmosphere."

"Easy...."

WHUMMMMP!

"Antimatter explosion, sir -- planet surface. Power filed inactive!"

"12 seconds to burnout...."

"Engineering, emergency warp speed, full reverse. Now!"

For an eternity the ENTERPRISE hung suspended, poised on the brink of oblivion. Then a violent concussion slammed the crew helplessly into their seats as the single warp engine roared online.

Gravity slowly fell to ship's normal, releasing its victims reluctantly as alarms alternately clanged and wailed for attention.

"Sir...."

With blinding suddenness a bright star field filled the forward view-screen.

"Flying free, Captain!" Sulu was ecstatic.

"The corridor has been rendered ineffective. Ship's status: operational." Spock's voice was a low, even rumble.

Kirk swiveled toward him, basking in the familiar glow from the sable eyes and savoring the heartwarming, barely discernable curve of the fine lips. The captain allowed himself a hearty grin as warning bells were silenced and the rest of his command crew broke into a brief but jubilant cheer.

"I love you," he mouthed wordlessly, joyously, through the uproarious confusion.

McCoy had appeared at the bridge railing during the melee. "But how long will that thing be out of commission, Spock? Just until that antimatter explosion quits feeding on itself? Then they'll be at it again?"

"Always the skeptic, Doctor. On the contrary. I fitted the actual intermix chamber with heat shields which allowed it to penetrate directly to the source of the corridor's power. Sensors indicate that it has been successful."

"The Federation will continue their patrol of the area, I'm certain," the captain added. "And I expect they'll also see to it that no more corridors are erected through those sensor nets. We've gathered enough

data to make that possible." Kirk looked thoughtful. "But all those people down there... confined... bound to one place forever."

"Wait just a minute, Jim," McCoy drew himself up beside Kirk. "While you-all have been busy trying to figure out new and ingenious ways to blow up this ship, I've been doing a little research of my own. With what I've learned about this parasite in my lab and from Fabrini records, I think I can turn it over to Starfleet and expect to immunize humanoids very soon."

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relaxed?
"Then under proper direction the Hestriades will be able to seek new worlds." Kirk was revealed. He let himself relax fully, nestling comfortably into the chair. "Mister Chekov, plot a course for the nearest repair dock. Let's give this lady back her wings."

"Wings, Captain?" Spock strolled innocently toward the center seat.

"Yes, I know, Mister Spock. The ENTERPRISE doesn't really have wings." He glanced up sideways with a satisfied smile. "And neither does her captain," he added by way of apology. Then his look grew mischievous. "But I do have a valid entry registration for the second round of a certain chess tournament... if you'd care to join me?"

McCoy took in the affectionate banter, the relaxed atmosphere, the Vulcan's hand in its customary place on the command chair. "I take it," he focused on Spock, then turned pointedly to Kirk, "the crisis is passed?"

"Yes, Bones. The crisis is passed." Smiling indulgently up at the tall figure by his side, Kirk wriggled further back in his chair, looking very content.

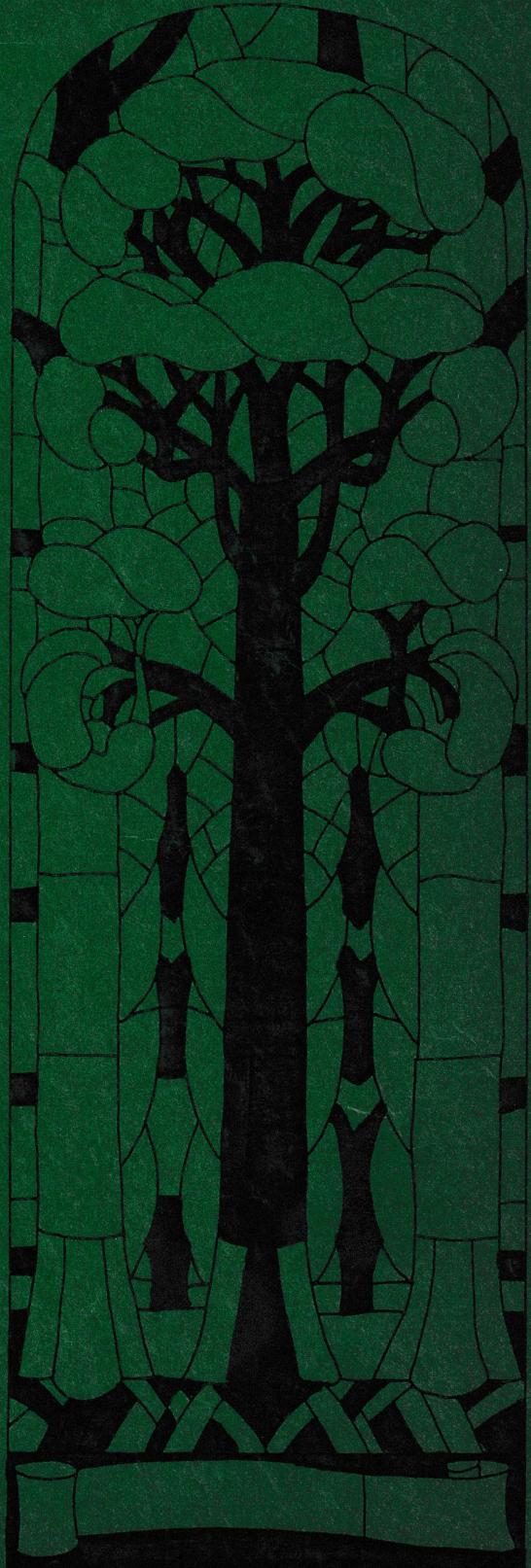
It was then that McCoy noticed.

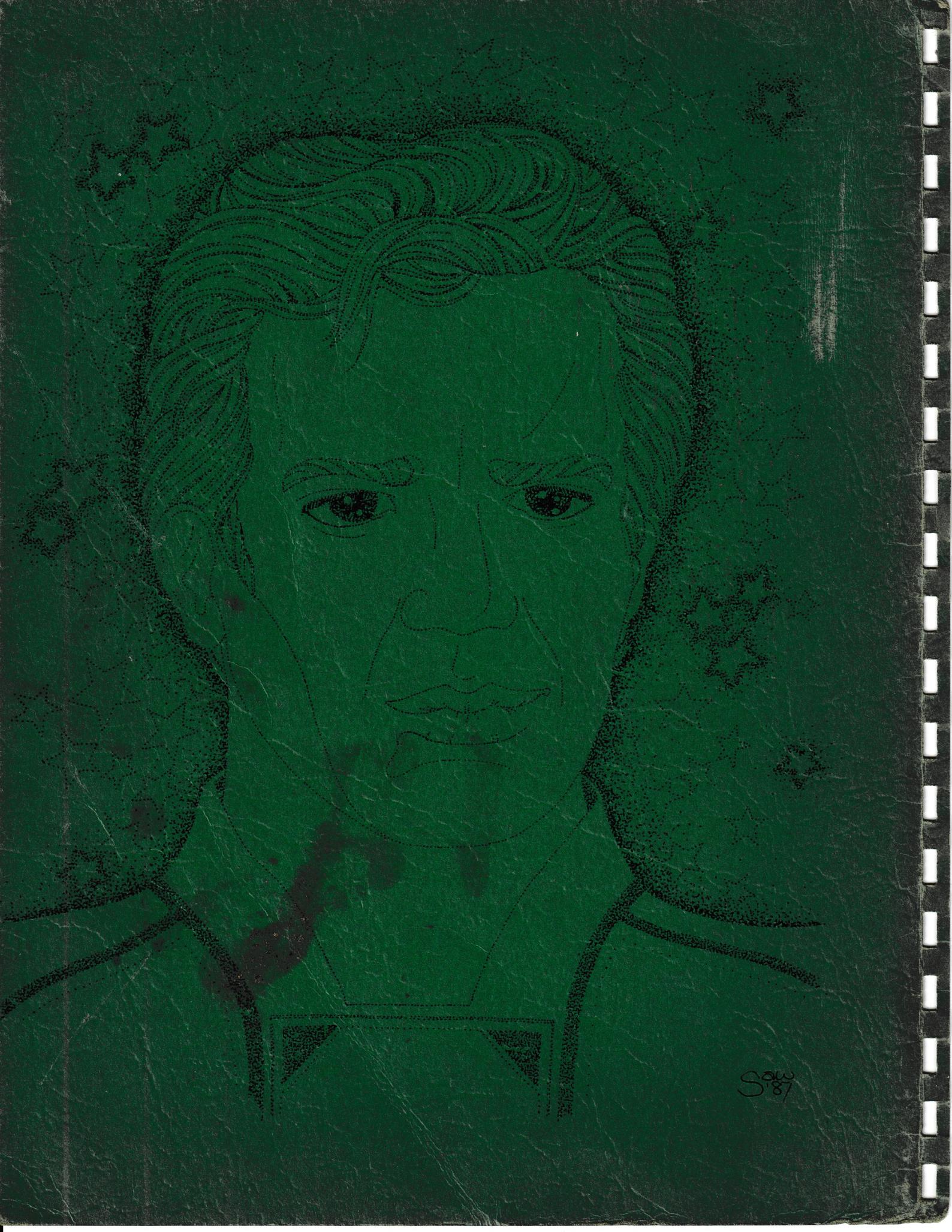
The Vulcan's hand no longer gripped the chair, but had come easily to rest on his captain's shoulder.

VOYAGER

Lights from the city
dim the stars to vague glimmers;
to search for one among the many
is fruitless.
To even think of you is... hopeless.
Where it went wrong
no longer matters,
who was at fault is
so much dust on the wind,
All I know is,
though I thought coming
home would end my years of searching,
with this resolve to win you back,
my voyage is only about to begin.

DOVYA BLACQUE





Saw
87